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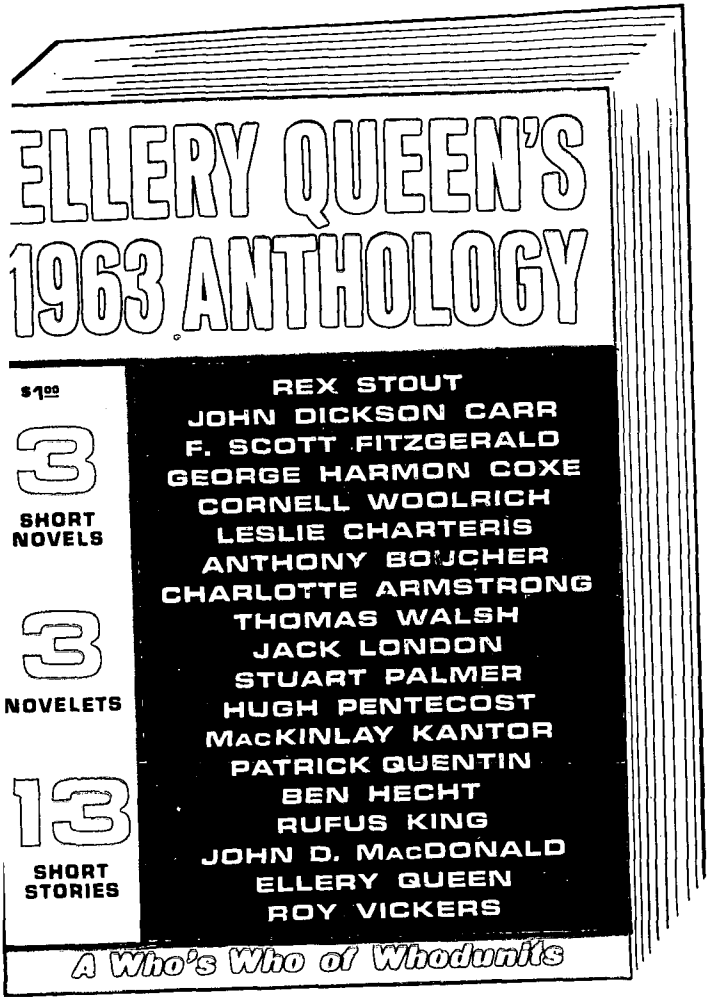

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THE QUESTION MY SON ASKED

by STANLEY ELLIN

I AM AN ELECTROCUTIONER . . . I prefer this word to executioner; I think words make a difference. When I was a boy, people who buried the dead were undertakers, and then somewhere along the way they became morticians and are better off for it.

Take the one who used to be the undertaker in my town. He was a decent, respectable man very friendly if you'd let him be, but hardly anybody would let him be. Today, his son—who now runs the business—is not an undertaker but a mortician, and is welcome everywhere. As a matter of fact, he's an officer in my Lodge and is one of the most popular members we have. And all it took to do that was changing one word to another. The job's the same but the word is different, and people somehow will always go by words rather than meanings.

So, as I said, I am an electrocutioner—which is the proper professional word for it in my state where the electric chair is the means of execution.

Not that this is my profession. Actually, it's a sideline, as it is for most of us who perform executions. My real business is running an electrical supply and repair shop just as my father did before me. When he died I inherited not only the business from him, but also the position of state's electrocutioner.

We established a tradition, my father and I. He was running the shop profitably even before the turn of the century when electricity was a comparatively new thing, and he was the first man to perform a successful electrocution for the state. It was not the state's first electrocution, however. That one was an experiment and was badly bungled by the engineer who installed the chair in the state prison. My father, who had helped install the chair, was the assistant at the electrocution, and he told me that everything that

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could go wrong that day did go wrong. The current was eccentric, his boss froze on the switch, and the man in the chair was alive and kicking at the same time he was being burned to a crisp. The next time, my father offered to do the job himself, rewired the chair, and handled the switch so well that he was offered the job of official electrocutioner.

I followed in his footsteps, which is how a tradition is made, but I am afraid this one ends with me. I have a son, and what I said to him and what he said to me is the crux of the matter. He asked me a question—well, in my opinion, it was the kind of question that's at the bottom of most of the world's troubles today. There are some sleeping dogs that should be left to lie; there are some questions that should not be asked.

To understand all this, I think you have to understand me, and nothing could be easier. I'm sixty, just beginning to look my age, a little overweight, suffer sometimes from arthritis when the weather is damp. I'm a good citizen, complain about my taxes but pay them on schedule, vote for the right party, and run my business well enough to make a comfortable living from it.

I've been married thirty-five years and never looked at another woman in all that time. Well, looked maybe, but no more than that. I have a married daughter and a granddaughter almost a year old, and the prettiest, smilingest baby in town. I spoil her and don't apologize for it, because in my opinion that is what grandfathers were made for—to spoil their grandchildren. Let mama and papa attend to the business; grandpa is there for the fun.

And beyond all that I have a son who asks questions. The kind that shouldn't be asked.

Put the picture together, and what you get is someone like yourself. I might be your next-door neighbor, I might be your old friend, I might be the uncle you meet whenever the family gets together at a wedding or a funeral. I'm like you.

Naturally, we all look different on the outside but we can still recognize each other on sight as the same kind of people. Deep down inside where it matters we have the same feelings, and we know that without any questions being asked about them.

"But," you might say, "there is a difference between us. You're the one who performs the executions, and I'm the one who reads about them in the papers, and that's a big difference, no matter how you look at it."

Is it? Well, look at it without prejudice, look at it with absolute honesty, and you'll have to admit that you're being unfair.

Let's face the facts, we're all in this together. If an old friend of yours happens to serve on a jury that finds a murderer guilty, you don't lock the door against him, do you? More than that: if you could

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get an introduction to the judge who sentences that murderer to the electric chair, you'd be proud of it, wouldn't you? You'd be honored to have him sit at your table, and you'd be quick enough to let the world know about it.

And since you're so willing to be friendly with the jury that convicts and the judge that sentences, what about the man who has to pull the switch? He's finished the job you wanted done, he's made the world a better place for it. Why must he go hide away in a dark corner until the next time he's needed?

There's no use denying that nearly everybody feels he should, and there's less use denying that it's a cruel thing for anyone in my position to face. If you don't mind some strong language, it's a damned outrage to hire a man for an unpleasant job, and then despise him for it. Sometimes it's hard to abide such righteousness.

How do I get along in the face of it? The only way possible—by keeping my secret locked up tight and never being tempted to give it away. I don't like it that way, but I'm no fool about it.

The trouble is that I'm naturally easygoing and friendly. I'm the sociable kind. I like people, and I want them to like me. At Lodge meetings or in the clubhouse down at the golf course I'm always the center of the crowd. And I know what would happen if at any such time I ever opened my mouth and let that secret out. A five minute sensation, and after that the slow chill setting in. It would mean the end of my whole life then and there, the kind of life I want to live, and no man in his right mind throws away sixty years of his life for a five minute sensation.

You can see I've given the matter a lot of thought. More than that, it hasn't been idle thought. I don't pretend to be an educated man, but I'm willing to read books on any subject that interests me, and execution has been one of my main interests ever since I got into the line. I have the books sent to the shop where nobody takes notice of another piece of mail, and I keep them locked in a bin in my office so that I can read them in private.

There's a nasty smell about having to do it this way—at my age you hate to feel like a kid hiding himself away to read a dirty magazine—but I have no choice. There isn't a soul on earth outside of the warden at state's prison and a couple of picked guards there who know I'm the one pulling the switch at an execution, and I intend it to remain that way.

Oh, yes, my son knows now. Well, he's difficult in some ways, but he's no fool. If I wasn't sure he would keep his mouth shut about what I told him, I wouldn't have told it to him in the first place.

Have I learned anything from those books? At least enough to take a pride in what I'm doing for the state and the way I do it. As far back

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in history as you want to go there have always been executioners. The day that men first made laws to help keep peace among themselves was the day the first executioner was born. There have always been law-breakers; there must always be a way of punishing them. It's as simple as that.

The trouble is that nowadays there are too many people who don't want it to be as simple as that. I'm no hypocrite, I'm not one of those narrow-minded fools who thinks that every time a man comes up with a generous impulse he's some kind of crackpot. But he can be mistaken. I'd put most of the people who are against capital punishment in that class. They are fine, high-minded citizens who've never in their lives been close enough to a murderer or rapist to smell the evil in him. In fact, they're so fine and high-minded that they can't imagine anyone in the world not being like themselves. In that case, they say anybody who commits murder or rape is just a plain, ordinary human being who's had a bad spell. He's no criminal, they say, he's just sick. He doesn't need the electric chair; all he needs is a kindly old doctor to examine his head and straighten out the kinks in his brain.

In fact, they say there is no such thing as a criminal at all. There are only well people and sick people, and the ones who deserve all your worry and consideration are the sick ones. If they happen to murder or rape a few of the well ones now and then, why, just run for the doctor.

This is the argument from beginning to end, and I'd be the last one to deny that it's built on honest charity and good intentions. But it's a mistaken argument. It omits the one fact that matters. When anyone commits murder or rape he is no longer in the human race. A man has a human brain and a God-given soul to control his animal nature. When the animal in him takes control he's not a human being any more. Then he has to be exterminated the way any animal must be if it goes wild in the middle of helpless people. And my duty is to be the exterminator.

It could be that people just don't understand the meaning of the word *duty* any more. I don't want to sound old-fashioned, God forbid, but when I was a boy things were more straightforward and clear-cut. You learned to tell right from wrong, you learned to do what had to be done, and you didn't ask questions every step of the way. Or if you had to ask any questions, the ones that mattered were *how* and *when*.

Then along came psychology, along came the professors, and the main question was always *why*. Ask yourself *why*, *why*, *why* about everything you do, and you'll end up doing nothing. Let a couple of generations go along that way, and you'll finally have a breed of people who sit around in trees like monkeys, scratching their heads.

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Does this sound far-fetched? Well, it isn't. Life is a complicated thing to live. All his life a man finds himself facing one situation after another, and the way to handle them is to live by the rules. Ask yourself *why* once too often, and you can find yourself so tangled up that you go under. The show must go on. Why? Women and children first. Why? My country, right or wrong. Why? Never mind your duty. Just keep asking *why* until it's too late to do anything about it.

Around the time I first started going to school my father gave me a dog, a collie pup named Rex. A few years after Rex suddenly became unfriendly, the way a dog will sometimes, and then vicious, and then one day he bit my mother when she reached down to pat him.

The day after that I saw my father leaving the house with his hunting rifle under his arm and with Rex on a leash. It wasn't the hunting season, so I knew what was going to happen to Rex and I knew why. But it's forgivable in a boy to ask things that a man should be smart enough not to ask.

"Where are you taking Rex?" I asked my father. "What are you going to do with him?"

"I'm taking him out back of town," my father said. "I'm going to shoot him."

"But why?" I said, and that was when my father let me see that there is only one answer to such a question.

"Because it has to be done," he said.

I never forgot that lesson. It came hard; for a while I hated my father for it, but as I grew up I came to see how right he was. We both knew why the dog had to be killed. Beyond that, all questions would lead nowhere. Why the dog had become vicious, why God had put a dog on earth to be killed this way—these are the questions that you can talk out to the end of time, and while you're talking about them you still have a vicious dog on your hands.

It is strange to look back and realize now that when the business of the dog happened, and long before it and long after it, my father was an electrocutioner, and I never knew it. Nobody knew it, not even my mother. A few times a year my father would pack his bag and a few tools and go away for a couple of days, but that was all any of us knew. If you asked him where he was going he would simply say he had a job to do out of town. He was not a man you'd ever suspect of philandering or going off on a solitary drunk, so nobody gave it a second thought.

It worked the same way in my case. I found out how well it worked when I finally told my son what I had been doing on those jobs out of town, and that I had gotten the warden's permission to take him on as an assistant and train him to handle the chair himself when I retired. I could tell from the way he

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took it that he was as thunderstruck at this as I had been thirty years before when my father had taken me into his confidence.

"Electrocutioner?" said my son. "An *electrocutioner?*"

"Well, there's no disgrace to it," I said. "And since it's got to be done, and somebody has to do it, why not keep it in the family? If you knew anything about it, you'd know it's a profession that's often passed down in a family from generation to generation. What's wrong with a good, sound tradition? If more people believed in tradition you wouldn't have so many troubles in the world today."

It was the kind of argument that would have been more than enough to convince me when I was his age. What I hadn't taken into account was that my son wasn't like me, much as I wanted him to be. He was a grown man in his own right, but a grown man who had never settled down to his responsibilities. I had always kept closing my eyes to that, I had always seen him the way I wanted to and not the way he was.

When he left college after a year, I said, all right, there are some people who aren't made for college, I never went there, so what difference does it make. When he went out with one girl after another and could never make up his mind to marrying any of them, I said, well, he's young, he's sowing his wild oats, the time will come soon enough when he's ready to take care of a home and family. When he sat daydreaming in the shop instead of tending to business I never made a fuss about it. I knew when he put his mind to it he was as good an electrician as you could ask for, and in these soft times people are allowed to do a lot more dreaming and a lot less working than they used to.

The truth was that the only thing that mattered to me was being his friend. For all his faults he was a fine-looking boy with a good mind. He wasn't much for mixing with people, but if he wanted to he could win anyone over. And in the back of my mind all the while he was growing up was the thought that he was the only one who would learn my secret some day, and would share it with me, and make it easier to bear. I'm not secretive by nature. A man like me needs a thought like that to sustain him.

So when the time came to tell him he shook his head and said no. I felt that my legs had been kicked out from under me. I argued with him and he still said no, and I lost my temper.

"Are you against capital punishment?" I asked him. "You don't have to apologize if you are. I'd think all the more of you, if that's your only reason."

"I don't know if it is," he said.

"Well, you ought to make up your mind one way or the other," I told him. "I'd hate to think you were like every other hypocrite around who says it's all right to con-

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demn a man to the electric chair and all wrong to pull the switch."

"Do I have to be the one to pull it?" he said. "Do you?"

"Somebody has to do it. Somebody always has to do the dirty work for the rest of us. It's not like the Old Testament days when everybody did it for himself. Do you know how they executed a man in those days? They laid him on the ground tied hand and foot, and everybody around had to heave rocks on him until he was crushed to death. They didn't invite anybody to stand around and watch. You wouldn't have had much choice then, would you?"

"I don't know," he said. And then because he was as smart as they come and knew how to turn your words against you, he said, "After all, I'm not without sin."

"Don't talk like a child," I said. "You're without the sin of murder on you or any kind of sin that calls for execution. And if you're so sure the Bible has all the answers, you might remember that you're supposed to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

"Well," he said, "in this case I'll let you do the rendering."

I knew then and there from the way he said it and the way he looked at me that it was no use trying to argue with him. The worst of it was knowing that we had somehow moved far apart from each other and would never really be close again. I should have had sense enough to let it go at that. I should have just told him to forget the whole thing and keep his mouth shut about it.

Maybe if I had ever considered the possibility of his saying no, I would have done it. But because I hadn't considered any such possibility I was caught off balance, I was too much upset to think straight. I will admit it now. It was my own fault that I made an issue of things and led him to ask the one question he should never have asked.

"I see," I told him. "It's the same old story, isn't it? Let somebody else do it. But if they pull your number out of a hat and you have to serve on a jury and send a man to the chair, that's all right with you. At least, it's all right as long as there's somebody else to do the job that you and the judge and every decent citizen wants done. Let's face the facts, boy, you don't have the guts. I'd hate to think of you even walking by the death house. The shop is where you belong. You can be nice and cozy there, wiring up fixtures and ringing the cash register. I can handle my duties without your help."

It hurt me to say it. I had never talked like that to him before, and it hurt. The strange thing was that he didn't seem angry about it; he only looked at me puzzled.

"Is that all it is to you?" he said. "A duty?"

"Yes."

"But you get paid for it, don't you?"

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"I get paid little enough for it."

He kept looking at me that way. "Only a duty?" he said, and never took his eyes off me. "But you enjoy it, don't you?"

That was the question he asked.

You enjoy it, don't you? You stand there looking through a peephole in the wall at the chair. In thirty years I have stood there more than a hundred times looking at that chair. The guards bring somebody in. Usually he is in a daze; sometimes he screams, throws himself around and fights. Sometimes it is a woman, and a woman can be as hard to handle as a man when she is led to the chair. Sooner or later, whoever it is is strapped down and the black hood is dropped over his head. Now your hand is on the switch.

The warden signals, and you pull the switch. The current hits the body like a tremendous rush of air suddenly filling it. The body leaps out of the chair with only the straps holding it back. The head jerks, and a curl of smoke comes from it. You release the switch and the body falls back again.

You do it once more, do it a third time to make sure. And whenever your hand presses the switch you can see in your mind what the current is doing to that body and what the face under the hood must look like.

Enjoy it?

That was the question my son asked me. That was what he said to me, as if I didn't have the same feelings deep down in me that we all have.

Enjoy it?

But, my God, how could anyone *not* enjoy it!

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**AGATHA CHRISTIE**
TITLE:	***The Time Hercule Poirot Failed***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Hercule Poirot
LOCALES:	Belgium and France
TIME:	"Many years ago"
COMMENTS:	*Most readers think of Poirot as a French detective; actually, he was a member of the Belgian police. Here is one of his earliest cases—and his greatest failure.*

IT WAS A WILD NIGHT. OUTSIDE, the wind howled malevolently, and the rain beat against the windows in great gusts.

Poirot and I sat facing the hearth, our legs stretched out to the cheerful blaze. Between us was a small table. On my side of it stood some carefully brewed hot toddy; on Poirot's was a cup of thick, rich chocolate which I would not have drunk for a hundred pounds. Poirot sipped the thick brown mess in the pink china cup, and sighed with contentment.

"*Quelle belle vie!*" he murmured.

"Yes, it's a good old world," I agreed. "Here am I with a good job and here are you, famous—"

"Oh, *mon ami!*" protested Poirot.

"But you are. And rightly so! When I think back on your long line of successes, I am positively amazed. I don't believe you know what failure is!"

"He would be a droll kind of original who could say that!"

"No, but seriously, *have* you ever failed?"

"Innumerable times, my friend. What would you? *La bonne chance*, it cannot always be on your side. I have been called in too late. Very often another, working toward the

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same goal, has arrived there first. Twice have I been stricken down with illness just as I was on the point of success. One must take the downs with the ups, my friend."

"I didn't quite mean that," I said. "I meant, have you ever been completely down and out over a case through your own fault?"

"Ah, I comprehend! You ask if I have ever made the complete prize ass of myself, as you say over here? Once, my friend—" A slow, reflective smile hovered over his face. "Yes, once I made a fool of myself."

He sat up suddenly in his chair. "See here, my friend, you have, I know, kept a record of my little successes. You shall add one more story to the collection—the story of a failure!"

He leaned forward and placed a log on the fire. Then, after carefully wiping his hands on a little duster that hung on a nail by the fireplace, he leaned back and commenced his story . . . .

That of which I tell you (said M. Poirot) took place in Belgium many years ago. It was at the time of the terrible struggle in France between church and state.

M. Paul Déroulard was a French deputy of note. It was an open secret that the portfolio of a Minister awaited him. He was among the bitterest of the anti-Catholic party, and it was certain that on his accession to power, he would have to face violent enmity.

He was in many ways a peculiar man. Though he neither drank nor smoked, he was nevertheless not so scrupulous in other ways. You comprehend, Hastings, *c'etait des femmes —toujours des femmes!*

He had married some years earlier a young lady from Brussels who had brought him a substantial dot. Undoubtedly the money was useful to him in his career, as his family was not rich, though on the other hand he was entitled to call himself M. le Baron if he chose.

There were no children of the marriage, and his wife died after two years—the result of a fall downstairs. Among the property which she bequeathed to him was a house on the Avenue Louise in Brussels.

It was in this house that his sudden death took place, the event coinciding with the resignation of the Minister whose portfolio he was to inherit. All the papers printed long notices of his career. His death, which had taken place quite suddenly in the evening after dinner, was attributed to heart failure.

At that time, *mon ami*, I was, as you know, a member of the Belgian detective force. The death of M. Paul Déroulard was not particularly interesting to me. I am, as you also know, *bon catholique*, and his demise seemed to me fortunate.

It was some three days afterward, when my vacation had just begun, that I received a visitor at my own apartments—a lady, heavily veiled, but evidently quite young; and I

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perceived at once that she was a *jeune fille tout à fait comme il faut.*

"You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot?" she asked in a low sweet voice.

I bowed.

"Of the detective service?"

Again I bowed. "Be seated, I pray you, mademoiselle," I said.

She accepted a chair and drew aside her veil. Her face was charming, though marred with tears, and haunted as though with some poignant anxiety.

"Monsieur," she said, "I understand that you are now taking a vacation. Therefore you will be free to take up a private case. You understand that I do not wish to call in the police."

I shook my head. "I fear what you ask is impossible, mademoiselle. Even though on vacation, I am still of the police."

She leaned forward, "*Ecoutez, monsieur.* All that I ask of you is to investigate. The result of your investigations you are at perfect liberty to report to the police. If what I believe to be true *is* true, we shall need all the machinery of the law."

That placed a somewhat different complexion on the matter, and I placed myself at her service without more ado.

A slight color rose in her cheeks. "I thank you, monsieur. It is the death of M. Paul Déroulard that I ask you to investigate."

"*Comment?*" I exclaimed, surprised.

"Monsieur, I have nothing to go upon—nothing but my woman's instinct, but I am convinced—*convinced*, I tell you—that M. Déroulard did not die a natural death!"

"But surely the doctors—"

"Doctors may be mistaken. He was so robust, so strong. Ah, Monsieur Poirot, I beseech you to help me—"

The poor child was almost beside herself. She would have knelt to me. I soothed her as best I could.

"I will help you, mademoiselle. I feel almost sure that your fears are unfounded, but we will see. First, I will ask you to describe to me the residents of the house."

"There are the domestics, of course—Jeannette, Félicie, and Denise the cook. The cook has been there many years; the others are simple country girls. Also there is François, but he too is an old servant. Then there is Monsieur Déroulard's mother who lived with him, and myself. My name is Virginie Mesnard. I am a poor cousin of the late Madame Déroulard, M. Paul's wife, and I have been a member of their ménage for over three years. I have now described to you the household. There were also two guests staying in the house."

"And they were?"

"M. de Saint Alard, a neighbor of M. Déroulard's in France. Also an English friend, Mr. John Wilson."

"Are they still with you?"

"Mr. Wilson, yes, but M. de Saint Alard departed yesterday."

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"And what is your plan, Mademoiselle Mesnard?"

"If you will present yourself at the house in half an hour's time, I will have arranged some story to account for your presence. I had better represent you to be connected with journalism in some way. I shall say you have come from Paris, and that you have brought a card of introduction from M. de Saint Alard. Madame Déroulard is very feeble in health, and will pay little attention to details."

On mademoiselle's ingenious pretext I was admitted to the house, and after a brief interview with the dead deputy's mother, who was a wonderfully imposing and aristocratic figure though obviously in failing health, I was made free of the premises.

I wonder, my friend (continued Poirot), whether you can possibly figure to yourself the difficulties of my task? Here was a man whose death had taken place three days previously. If there *had* been foul play, only one possibility was admittable—poison! And I had had no chance of seeing the body, and there was no possibility of examining, or analyzing, any medium in which the poison could have been administered. There were no clues, false or otherwise, to consider. Had the man been poisoned? Had he died a natural death? I, Hercule Poirot, with nothing to help me, had to decide.

First, I interviewed the domestics, and with their aid, I recapitulated the evening. I paid especial notice to the food at dinner, and the method of serving it. The soup had been served by M. Déroulard himself from a tureen. Next a dish of cutlets, then a chicken. Finally a compote of fruits. And all placed on the table, and served by Monsieur himself. The coffee was brought in a big pot to the dinner table. Nothing there, *mon ami*—impossible to poison one without poisoning all!

After dinner Madame Déroulard had retired to her own apartments and Mademoiselle Virginie had accompanied her. The three men had adjourned to M. Déroulard's study. Here they had chatted amicably for some time, when suddenly, without any warning, the deputy had fallen heavily to the ground.

M. de Saint Alard had rushed out and told François to fetch a doctor immediately. He said it was without doubt an apoplexy—but when the doctor arrived, the patient was past help.

Mr. John Wilson, to whom I was presented by Mademoiselle Virginie, was what was known in those days as a regular John Bull Englishman, middle-aged and burly. His account, delivered in very British French, was substantially the same.

"Déroulard went very red in the face, and down he fell."

Next I went to the scene of the tragedy, the study, and was left alone there at my own request. So far there was nothing to support Mademoiselle Mesnard's theory. I

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could not but believe that it was a delusion on her part. Evidently she had entertained a romantic passion for the dead man which had not permitted her to take a normal view of the case.

Nevertheless, I searched the study with meticulous care. It was just possible that a hypodermic needle might have been introduced into the dead man's chair in such a way as to allow a fatal injection. The minute puncture it would cause might remain unnoticed.

But I could discover no sign to support that theory. I flung myself down in the chair with a gesture of despair.

"*Enfin*, I abandon it!" I said aloud. "There is not a clue anywhere. Everything is perfectly normal."

As I said the words, my eyes fell on a large box of chocolates standing on a table nearby, and my heart gave a leap. It might not be a clue to M. Déroulard's death, but here at least was something that was *not* normal.

I lifted the lid. The box was full, untouched; not a chocolate was missing—but that only made the peculiarity that had caught my eye more striking. For, see you, Hastings, while the box itself was pink, the lid was *blue*.

Now, one often sees a blue ribbon on a pink box, and vice versa, but a box of one color, and a lid of another —no, decidedly—*ça ne se voit jamais!*

I did not as yet see that this little incident was of any use to me, yet I determined to investigate it. I rang the bell for François, and asked him if his late master had been fond of sweets. A faint melancholy smile came to his lips.

"Passionately fond of them, monsieur. He would always have a box of chocolates in the house. He did not drink wine of any kind, you see."

"Yet this box has not been touched?" I lifted the lid to show him.

"Pardon, monsieur, but that was a new box purchased on the day of his death, the other being nearly finished."

"Then the other box was finished on the day of his death," I said slowly.

"Yes, monsieur. I found it empty in the morning and threw it away."

"Did M. Déroulard eat sweets at all hours of the day?"

"Usually after dinner, monsieur."

I began to see light.

"François," I said, "you can be discreet?"

"If there is need, monsieur."

"*Bon!* Know, then, that I am of the police. Can you find me that other box?"

"Without doubt, monsieur. It will be in the dustbin."

He departed, and returned in a few minutes with a dust-covered object. It was the duplicate of the box I held, save for the fact that this time the box was *blue* and the lid was *pink*.

I thanked François, recommended him once more to be discreet, and

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left the house in the Avenue Louise.

Next I called upon the doctor who had attended M. Déroulard. With him I had a difficult task. He entrenched himself prettily behind a wall of learned phraseology, but I fancied that he was not quite as sure about the case as he would have liked to be.

"There have been many curious occurrences of the kind," he observed, when I had managed to disarm him somewhat. "A sudden fit of anger, a violent emotion—after a heavy dinner, *c'est entendu*—then, with an access of rage, the blood flies to the head, and *pst!*—there you are!"

"But M. Déroulard had had no violent emotion."

"No? I made sure that he had been having a stormy altercation with M. de Saint Alard."

"Why should he?"

"*C'est évident!*" The doctor shrugged. "Was not M. de Saint Alard a Catholic of the most fanatical? Their friendship was being ruined by this question of church and state. Not a day passed without discussions. To M. de Saint Alard, Déroulard appeared almost as Antichrist."

This was unexpected, and gave me food for thought.

"One more question, Doctor: would it be possible to introduce a fatal dose of poison into a chocolate?"

"It would be possible, I suppose," said the doctor slowly. "Pure prussic acid would meet the case if there were no chance of evaporation, and a tiny globule of anything might be swallowed unnoticed—but it does not seem a very likely supposition. A chocolate full of morphine or strychnine—" He made a wry face. "You comprehend, M. Poirot—one bite would be enough! The unwary one would not stand upon ceremony."

"Thank you, M. le Docteur."

Next I made inquiries of the chemists, especially those in the neighborhood of the Avenue Louise. It is good to be of the police. I got the information I wanted without any trouble. Only in one case could I hear of any poison having been supplied to the house in question. This was some eye drops of atropine sulphate for Madame Déroulard. Atropine is a potent poison, and for the moment I was elated, but the symptoms of atropine poisoning are closely allied to those of ptomaine, and bear no resemblance to those I was studying. Besides, the prescription was an old one. Madame Déroulard had suffered from cataract in both eyes for many years.

I was turning away discouraged when the chemist's voice called me back.

"*Un moment*, M. Poirot. I remember, the girl who brought that prescription, she said something about having to go on to the *English* chemist. You might try there."

I did. Once more enforcing my official status, I got the information

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I wanted. On the day before M. Déroulard's death they had made up a prescription for Mr. John Wilson. Not that there was any making up about it. They were simply little tablets of trinitrin. I asked if I might see some. He showed me them, and my heart beat faster—for the tiny tablets were of *chocolate.*

"It is a poison?" I asked.

"No, monsieur."

"Can you describe to me its effect?"

"It lowers the blood pressure. It is given for some forms of heart trouble—angina pectoris for instance. It relieves the arterial tension. In arteriosclerosis—"

I interrupted him. "*Ma foi!* This rigmarole says nothing to me. Does it cause the face to flush?"

"Certainly it does."

"And supposing I ate ten—twenty of your little tablets, what then?"

"I should not advise you to attempt it," he replied dryly.

"And yet you say it is not poison?"

"There are many things not called poison which can kill a man," he replied.

I left the shop elated. At last, things had begun to march!

I now knew that John Wilson held the means for the crime—but what about the motive? He had come to Belgium on business, and had asked M. Déroulard, whom he knew slightly, to put him up. There was apparently no way in which Déroulard's death could benefit him.

Moreover, I discovered by inquiries in England that he had suffered for some years from that painful form of heart disease known as angina. Therefore he had a genuine right to have those tablets in his possession. Nevertheless, I was convinced that someone had gone to the chocolate box, opening the full one first by mistake, and had abstracted the contents of the last chocolate in the older box, cramming in as many tiny trinitrin tablets as it would hold. The chocolates were large ones. At least twenty tablets, I felt sure, could have been inserted. But who had done this?

There were two guests in the house. John Wilson had the means. Saint Alard had the motive—remember, he was a fanatic, and there is no fanatic like a religious fanatic. Could he have got hold of John Wilson's trinitrin?

Another little idea came to me. Ah, you smile at my little ideas! Why had Wilson run out of trinitrin? Surely he would bring an adequate supply from England.

I called once more at the house in the Avenue Louise. Wilson was out, but I saw the girl who did his room, Félicie. I demanded of her immediately whether it was not true that M. Wilson had lost a bottle from his washstand some little time ago.

The girl responded eagerly. Yes, it was quite true. She, Félicie, had been blamed for it. The English gentleman had evidently thought

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that she had broken it, and did not like to say so. Whereas she had never even touched it. Without doubt it was Jeannette—always nosing round where she had no business to be—

I calmed the flow of words and took my leave. I knew now all that I needed to know. It remained for me to prove my case. That, I felt, would not be easy. *I* might be sure that Saint Alard had removed the bottle of trinitrin from John Wilson's washstand, but to convince others, I would have to produce evidence. And I had none to produce!

Never mind. I *knew*—that was the great thing.

I asked for an interview with Mademoiselle Mesnard and requested of her the address of M. de Saint Alard. A look of trouble came over her face.

"Why do you want it, monsieur?"

"Mademoiselle, it is necessary."

She seemed doubtful.

"He can tell you nothing. He is a man whose thoughts are not in this world. He hardly notices what goes on around him."

"Possibly, mademoiselle. Nevertheless, he was an old friend of M. Déroulard's. There may be things he can tell me—things of the past—old grudges—old love affairs."

The girl flushed and bit her lip. "As you please—but—but—I feel sure now that I have been mistaken. It was good of you to accede to my demand, but I was upset—almost distraught at the time. I see now that there is no mystery to solve. Leave it, I beg of you, monsieur."

I eyed her closely.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "it is sometimes difficult for a dog to find a scent, but once he *has* found it, nothing on earth will make him leave it! That is if he is a good dog! And I, mademoiselle, I, Hercule Poirot, am a very good dog."

Without a word she turned away. A few minutes later she returned with the address written on a sheet of paper. I left the house. François was waiting for me outside. He looked at me anxiously.

"There is no news, monsieur?"

"None as yet, my friend."

"Ah! *Pauvre* Monsieur Déroulard!" he sighed. "I too was of his way of thinking. I do not care for priests. Not that I would say so in the house. The women are all devout—a good thing perhaps. *Madame est très pieuse—et Mademoiselle Virginie aussi.*"

Mademoiselle Virginie? Was she "*très pieuse?*" Thinking of the tear-stained passionate face I had seen that first day, I wondered.

Having obtained the address of M. de Saint Alard, I wasted no time. I arrived in the neighborhood of his château in the Ardennes but it was some days before I could find a pretext for gaining admission to the house. In the end I did—how do you think—as a plumber, *mon ami!*

It was the affair of a moment to arrange a neat little gas leak in his

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bedroom. I departed for my tools and took care to return with them at an hour when I knew I should have the field to myself. What I was searching for, I hardly knew. The one thing needful, I could not believe there was any chance of finding. He would never have run the risk of keeping it.

Still when I found a little cupboard above the washstand locked, I could not resist the temptation of seeing what was inside it. The lock was quite a simple one to pick. The door swung open. It was full of old bottles.

I took them up one by one with a trembling hand. Suddenly, I uttered a cry. Figure to yourself, my friend, I held in my hand a little phial with an English chemist's label. On it were the words: "*Trinitrin Tablets. One to be taken when required. For Mr. John Wilson.*"

I controlled my emotion, closed the little cupboard, slipped the bottle into my pocket, and continued to repair the gas leak—one must be methodical. Then I left the château, and took train for my own country as soon as possible.

I arrived in Brussels late that night. I was writing out a report for the préfet in the morning, when a note was brought to me. It was from old Madame Déroulard, and it summoned me to the house in the Avenue Louise without delay.

François opened the door to me.

"Madame la Baronne is waiting for you."

He conducted me to her apartments. She sat in state in a large armchair. There was no sign of Mademoiselle Virginie.

"M. Poirot," said the old lady. "I have just learned that you are not what you pretended to be. You are a police officer."

"That is so, madame."

"You came here to inquire into the circumstances of my son's death?"

Again I replied, "That is so, madame."

"I should be glad if you would tell me what progress you have made."

I hesitated. "First I would like to know how you have learned all this, madame."

"From one who is no longer of this world."

Her words, and the brooding way she uttered them, sent a chill to my heart. I was incapable of speech.

"Therefore, monsieur, I would beg of you most urgently to tell me exactly what progress you have made in your investigation."

"Madame, my investigation is finished."

"My son?"

"Was killed deliberately."

"You know by whom?"

"Yes, madame."

"Who, then?"

"M. de Saint Alard."

The old lady shook her head.

"You are wrong. M. de Saint Alard is incapable of such a crime."

"The proofs are in my hands."

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"I beg of you once more to tell me all."

This time I obeyed, going over each step that had led me to the discovery of the truth. She listened attentively. At the end she nodded her head.

"Yes, yes, it is all as you say—all but one thing. It was not M. de Saint Alard who killed my son. It was I, his mother."

I stared at her. She continued to nod her head gently.

"It is well that I sent for you. It is the providence of the good God that Virginie told me before she departed for the convent, what she had done. Listen, M. Poirot! My son was an evil man. He persecuted the church. He led a life of mortal sin. He dragged down other souls beside his own. But there was worse than that.

"As I came out of my room in this house one morning, I saw my daughter-in-law standing at the head of the stairs. She was reading a letter. I saw my son steal up behind her. One swift push, and she fell, striking her head on the marble steps. When they picked her up she was dead. My son was a murderer, and only I, his mother, knew it."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "You cannot conceive, monsieur, of my agony, my despair. What was I to do? Denounce him to the police? I could not bring myself to do it. It was my duty, but my flesh was weak. Besides, would they believe me? My eyesight had been failing for some time—they would say I was mistaken.

"I kept silence. But my conscience gave me no peace. By keeping silence I too was a murderer. My son inherited his wife's money. He flourished as the green bay tree. And now he was to have a Minister's portfolio. His persecution of the church would be redoubled.

"And there was Virginie. She, poor child, beautiful, naturally pious, was fascinated by him. He had a strange and terrible power over women. I saw it coming. I was powerless to prevent it. He had no intention of marrying her. The time came when she was ready to yield to him.

"Then I saw my path clear. He was my son. I had given him life. I was responsible for him. He had killed one woman's body, now he would kill another's soul!

"I went to Mr. Wilson's room, and took the bottle of tablets. He had once said laughingly that there were enough in it to kill a man! I went into the study and opened the big box of chocolates that always stood on the table. I opened a new box by mistake. The other was on the table also. There was just one chocolate left in it. That simplified things. No one ate chocolates except my son and Virginie. I would keep her with me that night. All went as I had planned—"

She paused, closing her eyes a minute then opened them again.

"M. Poirot, I am in your hands.

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They tell me I have not many days to live. I am willing to answer for my action before the good God. Must I answer for it on earth also?"

I hesitated. "But the empty bottle, madame," I said to gain time. "How came that into M. de Saint Alard's possession?"

"When he came to say goodbye to me, monsieur, I slipped it into his pocket. I did not know how to get rid of it. I am so infirm that I cannot move about much without help, and finding it empty in my rooms might have caused suspicion. You understand, monsieur,"—she drew herself up to her full height—"it was with no idea of casting suspicion on M. de Saint Alard! I never dreamed of such a thing. I thought his valet would find an empty bottle and throw it away without question."

I bowed my head. "I comprehend, madame," I said.

"And your decision, monsieur?"

Her voice was firm and unfaltering, her head held as high as ever.

I rose to my feet.

"Madame," I said, "I have the honor to wish you good day. I have made my investigations—and failed! The matter is closed."

Hercule Poirot was silent for a moment, then said quietly, "She died just a week later. Mademoiselle Virginie passed through her novitiate, and duly took the veil. That, my friend, is the story. I must admit that I do not make a fine figure in it."

"But that was hardly a failure," I expostulated. "What else could you have thought under the circumstances?"

"*Ah, sacré, mon ami,*" cried Poirot, becoming suddenly animated. "It is that you do not see? But I was thirty-six times an idiot! My gray cells, they functioned not at all. The whole time I had the true clue in my hands."

"What clue?"

"*The chocolate box!* Do you not see? Would anyone in possession of their full eyesight make such a mistake? I knew Madame Déroulard had cataract—the atropine drops told me that. There was only one person in the household whose eyesight was such that she could not see which lid to replace. It was the chocolate box that started me on the track, and yet up to the end I failed to perceive its real significance!

"Also my psychology was at fault. Had M. de Saint Alard been the criminal, he would never have kept an incriminating bottle. Finding it was a proof of his innocence. I had learned already from Mademoiselle Virginie that he was absent-minded. Altogether it was a miserable affair that I have recounted to you there! Only to you have I told the story. You comprehend, I do not figure well in it! An old lady commits a crime in such a simple fashion and I, Hercule Poirot, am completely deceived. *Sapristi!* it does not bear thinking of! Forget it. Or no—remember it, and if you think at

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any time that I am growing conceited—it is not likely, but . . ."

I concealed a smile.

"*Eh bien*, my friend, you shall say to me, 'Chocolate box.' Is it agreed?"

"It's a bargain!"

"After all," said Poirot reflectively, "it was an experience! I, who have undoubtedly the finest brain in Europe at present, can afford to be magnanimous!"

"Chocolate box," I murmured gently.

"*Pardon, mon ami?*"

I looked at Poirot's innocent face, as he bent forward inquiringly, and my heart smote me. I had suffered often at his hands, but I, too, though not possessing the finest brain in Europe, could afford to be magnanimous!

"Nothing," I lied, and lit another pipeful, smiling to myself.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**JAMES HOLDING**
TITLE:	***The Photographer and the Undertaker***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The Photographer was a professional assassin. He dealt in murder—although he preferred not to use that ugly word. His business was that of "nullification."*

IT WAS ONLY WHEN HE SAW GOMEZ watching the front door of his studio that Manuel Andradas realized that his latest assignment from the Management was different from the others. Different and infinitely more dangerous.

Until that moment Manuel had taken it for granted that this was just another routine "nullification" (as he called it to himself) for which he would be generously paid in the usual manner. Provided, of course, he performed it with his usual efficiency. And exhibited his usual lack of curiosity as to the Management's motives.

Only the purest chance gave him a fleeting glimpse of Gomez standing in the shadow of the warehouse across the street from the studio. The sun had sunk from sight beyond Corcovado, and Gomez was so motionless, so inconspicuous, so shadowed in the purple dusk of the narrow Rio street as to be invisible except to the sharpest eyes. But Manuel, returning to his studio-home for dinner, happened to flick a glance that way as he got out his keys to open his door. And he recognized Gomez instantly. Even in the shadow he picked up the flash of the orange tie, the white vest edging. And he fancied he could also make out, although it was patently impossible from such a distance, the dead white furrow of the scar that disfigured Gomez' left cheek.

Manuel gave no visible sign that he had seen Gomez, nor did he reveal by look or action that he realized he was himself being observed. His features were naturally immo-

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bile, his muddy brown eyes customarily expressionless. Yet it was very difficult for him to hide his astonishment.

He was, in truth, more than astonished; he was thunderstruck. And Manuel Andradas, ordinarily the most calm and unemotional of men, had been thunderstruck only once before in his 33 years. That time it was by a totally unexpected gush of affection for a young girl he had been paid to "nullify" in Bahia. This time, he was thunderstruck by something else entirely—the imminent possibility of his own death.

For the presence of Gomez across the street could mean only one thing: Gomez intended to kill him.

It has begun exactly like any assignment.

Rodolfo had got word to him to meet him in Rua do Ouvidor as usual. Rodolfo was Manuel's only contact in Rio with the Management, the High Ones, the Organization that employed him periodically. And he didn't even know Rodolfo's last name.

Waiting for Rodolfo at the appointed hour, he stood with his back against the wall of a building near an orchid booth in the flower market. He had his camera case slung over his shoulder. It was a trademark with him. It was why they called him the Photographer. He loved only two things on earth—photography and money.

Rodolfo touched his arm lightly and walked ahead of him into a café on Avenida Rio Branco. When they were settled facing each other, with *cafezinho* before them, Rodolfo sipped at his drink and said in a neutral voice, "No vacation trips this time, Photographer. The job's right here in Rio."

"Good," said Manuel, sipping in his turn. "I like to work at home."

"This one is quite important," Rodolfo said, looking up from his coffee cup with heavy emphasis. "A good price will be paid."

Manuel nodded, noting that the spark he saw in Rodolfo's eyes was one of earnestness and not, as he first thought, of amusement. "What price?" he said quietly.

"A million cruzeiros." Rodolfo's voice, in spite of itself, contained overtones of the respect with which even he held such a sum of money. "A million."

Manuel drew a deep breath. "The Management is generous," he admitted. "A million is excellent. A third in advance, as usual?"

Rodolfo nodded, swirling the jet-black coffee around in his little cup. "And no deadline. Although I would not put it off too long if I were you." This time he did not raise his eyes to Manuel's. But Manuel had the impression, from the crooked oily lift of Rodolfo's lip, that his "contact" was smiling.

"Who?" said Manuel, blowing on his coffee to cool it.

With a soft pencil Rodolfo wrote

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a name and address on the border of the menu that lay on the table between them. He turned it so Manuel could read what he had written. Automatically, Manuel committed name and address to memory, then folded the menu sheet, tore it into bits, and deposited the bits in the side pocket of his conservative sports jacket. He was smiling.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Rodolfo.

"It is only eight blocks from my own house. Practically a neighbor, you might say."

"Yes. You don't know him, do you?"

Manuel shook his head. "I do not. But that will soon be mended."

Rodolfo finished his coffee and dropped a few coins on the table. "*Bom*," he said. "Good. Will you be in touch with me?"

"I shall call. And *muito obrigado*. Can you inform the Management that I am grateful for the raise in price?"

"I'll tell them."

The two men got up and left the café. On the sidewalk, when they shook hands, Rodolfo left a thick pad of banknotes in Manuel's palm.

Manuel set out on foot for the address Rodolfo had given him.

He located it without trouble in a side street near the Church of Sao Francisco. It was a small, rather dilapidated building leaning slightly askew against its right-hand neighbor, a tobacconist's shop, and presenting to Manuel's scrutiny a completely commonplace face except for two features: an automobile entrance that obviously led into an inner courtyard, and a discreet brass sign on the wall beside the auto entrance that read, in raised letters:

Gomez
Mortician

Manuel grinned when he saw the sign. *Va bem*, he thought, he is a mortician. What a pity. He will soon be in need of his own services and unable to perform them. The thought amused Manuel.

He walked past the house quite casually and sat down like any weary photographer on a bench in the tiny park across the street from Gomez' automobile entrance. Here, while changing film in his camera and apparently paying no attention whatever to his surroundings, he watched with unwavering attention the mortuary of Gomez.

For twenty minutes nothing happened. No one went in or out. No cars, carriages, or hearses arrived or departed. No activity showed in the courtyard beyond the auto entrance.

Manuel became restive. Does this Gomez have no funerary business at all, he asked himself impatiently. Are people not dying and having to be buried in Rio today? He looked reflectively at the tobacconist's shop next to the mortuary, toying with the idea of going into it and at-

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tempting to gather information about Gomez.

This dangerous expedient, however, proved unnecessary. For just then an ancient Model A Ford, gleamingly expressive of the loving care that had been lavished on it for years, approached from the left and slowed down to make the turn into the mortuary driveway.

Manuel fixed his eyes on the driver like limpets, sucking out in a few seconds the salient points of the man's appearance. An orange necktie, flamboyant; white-braid edging around the V of a dark vest under a coffee-colored jacket; a narrow, innocuous-looking face with almost delicate features, high cheekbones, and a puckered scar slashed across the left cheek; no hat, but long blond hair combed straight back over the skull, very sleek; and a short stature, if one could judge by the unimpressive height of the man's head above the steering wheel of the car.

Manuel stretched and stood up from his bench. He did not cross the street, but strolled past the mortuary on the opposite sidewalk. And quite clearly, as the Ford pulled up in the inner courtyard, he heard an obsequious masculine voice say, "Ah, Senhor Gomez! You are back. We did not know what arrangements to make for the Perreira funeral tomorrow."

Then Manuel knew that the man in the orange tie was his assignment.

Fortunately.

For after two hours of leisurely picture-taking on Ipanema Beach (he had marked down his man and there was no deadline, after all), trying out the new, faster color film recently introduced into Brazil by a North American firm; and after drinking two glasses of cashew juice —a beverage he frequently used to lubricate his wits as well as to quench his thirst—Manuel returned to his home for dinner, and recognized that very fellow Gomez, the mortician, with his orange tie and white vest braid, lurking across the street from his studio . . .

Manuel entered his studio and closed the door after him, sliding the bolt carefully across. For he was under no delusions, now that the nature of his assignment had become suddenly clear to him. He was slated for death. And it gave him a rather strange sensation to have his usual role reversed without warning —to become the intended victim instead of the executioner.

In keeping with his nature, however, he did not panic nor allow his emotions to assert themselves. Where other men in similar circumstances might have given way to indignation, anger, self-pity, or, most likely of all, terror, Manuel Andradas felt only an obscure kind of pleasure at this unexpected challenge to his skills.

He switched on the electric light in the studio. Then he lowered the venetian blind on his modest show

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window, hiding from the eyes of passers-by the dozen portraits of brides, babies, and businessmen the window contained—and also hiding Manuel himself from the seeking eyes of Gomez, the mortician, across the street. This done, he lit a cheap brown-paper cigarette and sat down in an old Morris chair near the tripod that supported his portrait camera, and put his wits to work.

He forgot about dinner momentarily.

Painstakingly he scraped together into one small mental heap the scattered rumors, half truths, and speculations in his head about the man across the street. Gomez, the mortician. Of course. It was obvious now. The Undertaker. It must be. The unknown colleague who must exist, surely, if the Management had someone else to handle rush assignments when Manuel was not available. He had suspected that such a person existed. But until now he had never been sure. Only now did that single unguarded reference by Rodolfo, two years ago, to somebody he called The Undertaker assume significance. And only now did Manuel realize why Rodolfo had seemed covertly amused this morning.

For The Undertaker was a specific man. And his activities were not confined merely to the burying of the dead. Else why should he be watching Manuel's studio at this moment just as he, Manuel, had watched Gomez' mortuary earlier today? Obviously, to identify his target, to become acquainted with the appearance and the habits of a man he had been ordered to destroy.

Relaxed in his chair, sucking on his cheap cigarette, Manuel worked it all out. He must allow Gomez to take the initiative, he concluded. That, it seemed to him, would be the best way.

When this had been decided to his satisfaction, he tamped out his cigarette in a flowerpot and proceeded to prepare a hearty dinner for himself.

The telephone rang just as he finished eating. He answered at once.

"This is Raphael Gomez," a voice told him. The voice went with the man, Manuel thought; it was thin and high-pitched. "I should like to make an appointment to have a photograph taken—a portrait I can include in a new business brochure I am having printed."

"That is easily arranged, Senhor," Manuel said. "Would you prefer a morning or evening appointment?"

"Evening," said Gomez. "And the sooner the better. The printer is waiting for my photograph to proceed with the brochure."

"Why don't you come over tonight?" Manuel suggested. "I am free between ten and eleven."

"Excellent. I shall be there at ten. It is kind of you to accommodate me so promptly." Was there a note of triumph already in his voice?

So it had begun. Methodically, Manuel washed, rinsed, and dried

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the dishes he had used at dinner, putting them carefully away in the cupboard of his tiny kitchen. There was no hurry. He had no other professional appointments tonight. And it was still a half hour until ten o'clock.

He was in his darkroom processing negatives when the knock came on his outer door at exactly ten o'clock. The darkroom was at one end of the studio. He opened the darkroom door a half inch; closing his eyes against the bright light it disclosed, and called loudly, "Come in, please." Then he shut the darkroom door again.

Through it he heard the street door open and close. "Senhor Gomez?" he asked through the darkroom door.

"Yes. Is that you, Senhor Andradas?" A pause. "Where are you?"

"I'm in the darkroom here, finishing up a rush job Take a chair, please. I shall join you in a moment."

Manuel rattled his trays of chemicals in the developing sink and placed his ear against the inside panel of the door, barely visible to him in the dim red glow of the darkroom's single bulb. He listened intently, almost sure that Gomez would not refuse the tempting bait of an unsuspecting victim conveniently trapped in a darkroom; and yet Manuel felt faintly uneasy.

"Don't hurry, I beg of you," came Gomez' high voice. There was a pause. The wicker chair Manuel sometimes used for posing family groups creaked loudly as weight was put on it out there in the studio. "I'll sit here and smoke a cigarette," Gomez called. Manuel heard a match being drawn across a matchbook ignition strip. "I can wait as long as necessary."

But if Senhor Gomez was sitting in the wicker chair smoking a cigarette, his voice was not. It was quite plainly approaching the darkroom door as it spoke.

Manuel was relieved. He stepped to the side of the darkroom door, his back against the thin partition that separated the darkroom from the studio proper. There he waited, watching the door handle in the rosy gloom.

Without a sound the handle began stealthily to turn. Manuel closed his eyes. The darkroom door was pressed open slowly at first, then thrown wide explosively as Gomez came swiftly through it, accompanied by a shaft of bright light from the studio.

By his keen ear alone, Manuel judged when Gomez had taken two steps into the darkroom and was clear of the door. Instantly, then, Manuel reached out and delivered a backhand blow on the door. Despite tightly shut eyes, Manuel hit the door and slammed it shut again.

When Manuel opened his eyes with the bang of the door, he found that his night vision, achieved and carefully preserved in the darkroom,

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had not been impaired in the least. He could see quite clearly in the room's dimness. But Gomez, suddenly plunged by the closing of the darkroom door into almost total blackness, was for the moment completely blinded. Which was the way Manuel wanted him to be.

Gomez whirled like a coiled spring at the flurry of movement behind him and struck savagely toward the door panel with his right arm. Manuel could see that he wielded a slender, eight-inch knife whose opened blade reflected the red light of the darkroom bulb, seeming already stained with blood.

This knife, guided ineptly by Gomez' unseeing eyes, swept past Manuel's shoulder and buried its point in the door panel with a dull thud. Manuel said quietly, "Allow me to hold that for you, Senhor Gomez," and stretching out his right hand, he fastened his spatulate fingers like a bracelet of iron around Gomez' knife-wrist and squeezed.

The bones of Gomez' wrist collapsed on each other; they ground together and shattered with tiny cracking sounds that seemed quite loud in the stillness of the darkroom.

Gomez' grasp on his knife became immediately loose and flaccid, then abandoned the weapon altogether.

Manuel plucked the knife from the door panel with his left hand as he retained his grip on Gomez' shattered wrist with his right. He said calmly, "If you will open the door, Senhor Gomez, we can return to the studio. We have much to discuss."

Gomez said nothing beyond the painful drawing in of his breath. With his uninjured hand he opened the door into the studio. Manuel blinked in the sudden glare of light. When he saw the pallor of Gomez' high-cheekboned, narrow face, he knew the man was almost fainting, so he flung Gomez' knife into a corner of the studio and released the man's wrist. Then he supported him to the wicker chair, sat him in it almost tenderly, and poured him a half glass of strong brandy from a bottle on a shelf.

While Gomez was drinking, one-handed, Manuel tied him securely into the wicker chair with a length of insulated wire. Deliberately, he left Gomez' hands free. He then sat down in his own Morris chair, facing Gomez.

Color was returning to Gomez' face. He finished drinking, and cushioned his hurt wrist in his other hand. He looked at Manuel and said impassively, "And now, the police?"

"Decidedly not the police," Manuel said.

"I was trying to kill you. You must have gathered that."

"I did. But you didn't succeed, did you?"

Gomez' eyes went to the bulging, ropy muscles that showed in Manuel's forearms even through the cloth of his shirt sleeves. "It was my first failure," he said, not with-

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out a certain pride. 'It not the police, Senhor, what then?"

Manuel said, "I am going to kill *you*."

"Kill me?" Gomez was surprised. Manuel, watching him narrowly, was convinced of that. Therefore, Gomez did not realize what the Management was up to. Manuel lit a cigarette.

"But not for a few minutes yet. First we must talk about the manner of your death."

Gomez shrugged. "Death is death. The manner of it makes no difference."

"I disagree with you, Undertaker," said Manuel softly.

Gomez started, dropped his hurt wrist, and groaned with the pain of it. "Who are you?" he asked Manuel. His face now was covered with a slight sheen of perspiration, even though the evening was cool. "What is this about an undertaker?"

"I am willing for you not to suffer unduly, Undertaker," Manuel said, "unless prolonged suffering is indicated by your actions. I know you are The Undertaker. I know you were hired by the Management to kill me. I know *why* you were hired to kill me."

"Even I do not know that," Gomez muttered.

"That is why you will die and I will live," said Manuel. "Because I knew why and you didn't. Listen." He puffed smoke through his nose and offered Gomez another finger of brandy. "I am in the same business that you're in, Gomez."

"We are both undertakers?" Gomez said, his eyes very sharp above his scar.

"Exactly. I am known to the Management as The Photographer, although I am an undertaker as well. Have you heard of me?"

"No."

"I was hired this afternoon to kill you, Gomez. By the Management. For a million cruzeiros."

"By God!" said Gomez, suddenly furiously angry. "A million! I was to receive the same for killing you!"

"Of course," said Manuel comfortably. "Don't you see it now? It was a competition, a contest."

"A competition?"

"Between you and me. The two professional assassins employed by the Management. To see which of us was the cleverer, the more reliable, the more efficient."

Gomez' thoughts were mirrored in his eyes. "I did not know there were two of us. But even so, would they set two good workmen at each other's throats merely as a game, merely for amusement?"

"There is a reason beyond amusement. I think it is this: that they now need only one of us on their staff. And they naturally wish to retain the better one."

"Naturally," Gomez said savagely. "Did they tell you who I was when they gave you your assignment?"

"No. And I never saw you before

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today. I got to work on my assignment a bit more quickly, that's all. I was watching your mortuary today, to catch a glimpse of you, when you drove home in your Ford. Then I happened to discover that *you* were watching me this evening. That could mean only one thing. Do you see?"

Gomez nodded. "Perfectly." He took a small sip of his brandy. When he finally spoke it was in a very disapproving tone. "I think the Management has played both of us a shabby trick."

"They are thorough, however," Manuel said. "And practical, you must admit. The winner of the contest will be handsomely paid. A million cruzeiros!" He stood up, reached under the wire that bound Gomez to his chair, and brought from Gomez' inside pocket a pad of banknotes. "Perhaps more," he said with pleasure. "I am glad you brought your advance payment for my death with you. I am sure the Management wanted me to have that, too." He returned to his chair. "And it will make my risks more worthwhile, I assure you."

"Risks?" asked Gomez.

Manuel nodded his big head solemnly. "I want to amuse the Management now at *their* expense," he said, "since they have been so well amused at ours, Undertaker. That is why I mentioned the manner in which you will die."

Gomez said nothing.

Manuel explained, "I *must* kill you, Undertaker. You appreciate my position, do you not? As a professional?"

"Certainly," said Gomez. "You cannot do otherwise."

"But," said Manuel, "I can kill you quickly and almost painlessly . . ." he held up one muscular hand and flexed it ". . . . or I can kill you in such a way as to make that crushed wrist of yours seem, by comparison, a sweet kiss of compassion."

"No doubt," said Gomez. His eyes held Manuel's. "And what must I do to be accorded this 'mercy' killing of yours, Photographer?"

"Very little." Manuel leaned forward in his chair. "I want the name of your contact with the Management, and how you get in touch with him. And I want to know what your usual system of nullification is."

For the first time during their interview, Gomez smiled. "Nullification? Are you sentimental, after all?"

Manuel flushed. "No. I prefer nullification to murder, that's all. A man must have some respect for his profession. Tell me, is your contact a man called Rodolfo?"

"No." For a long moment Gomez stared unseeingly at his hurt wrist, now beginning to swell. Then he looked levelly at Manuel. "I shall tell you what you ask," he said quietly, "but not because you frighten me with your threats of

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lingering death. I regard with contempt anything you can do to me. No. I shall tell you what you wish to know as my protest to the Management for their unethical conduct. This competition they arranged between us was cynically conceived, in my opinion. And utterly inexcusable. Do you understand how I feel?"

Manuel believed him. "I do. What is your contact's name?"

"Ernesto," said Gomez. "Ernesto da Silva, I believe, although I am sure only of 'Ernesto'. He has a large wen on his upper lip, and he walks stiff-legged, like a cat."

"How do you get in touch with him?"

"If I do not call him earlier, he meets me with the balance of my money in the Botanical Gardens at five o'clock in the evening, the day after he gets proof I have been successful. On a bench by the tiled drainage ditch at the end of the avenue of palms."

"What proof do you furnish?"

"An obituary in the newspaper." Manual said, "And your usual method?"

"I have no usual method. But I have used a knife and fire more frequently than anything else. The fire, you understand, to cover the evidence of—ah—" he smiled again, "ah—nullification."

Manuel thought for a moment. Then he slowly nodded his head and said "*Va bem*. It is enough. Thank you, Gomez. With this information I promise you I shall thoroughly amuse myself at the Management's expense. And perhaps you, too, will be amused, even though dead."

"Perhaps," Gomez conceded. He raised his good hand to brush it over his slick hair. "And perhaps, too, I shall not be dead." His hand continued its movement smoothly to the back of his neck, and came free holding a small throwing knife which he launched at Manuel's heart like a snake striking.

Manuel turned his body quickly in his chair and took the knife in the muscles of his upper arm where it stuck, quivering. His shirt sleeve began to redden.

He rose and leaned toward Gomez. "I salute you, Undertaker," he said. "It is better to die like a jaguar than an armadillo. I promise you now it will be quick." His stiffened right hand swept in a wide, inexorable arc and struck the base of Gomez' throat with a sodden, thunking sound—like the noise of a butcher's ax striking a chunk of meat.

Gomez died instantly.

Manuel untied him from the wicker chair. He drew the throwing knife from his own arm and plunged it into Gomez' chest over the heart He then took several photographs of Gomez in the chair, the knife haft plainly visible, the rolled-up, staring eyes their own admission of death. He used his Minox camera with a flashgun to take the pictures.

When he had developed and

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printed the best of these shots in his darkroom, making a three-by-five enlargement of the miniature negative, he withdrew the knife from Gomez' chest, carried The Undertaker into his bedroom, and placed him on his own bed. From his old files Manuel secured an armload of negatives and scattered them along the base of the wooden house-wall in his bedroom close to the bed. He spliced several long strips of Minox film together into a fuse, and led it from the studio to the pile of combustible film in the bedroom. Finally, he struck a match and ignited the studio end of the film strip.

All he took with him when he left the studio a few moments later was his camera.

The newspapers carried a whole column the following day about the untimely death of Manuel Andradas, well-known portrait photographer. His studio-home had burned to the ground in the night despite the best efforts of Rio's brave firefighters, and Manuel Andradas had burned, too, it seemed. His charred body, almost consumed by the fire, certainly unrecognizable, had been found in the ashes of the bedroom. He had probably fallen asleep while smoking in bed, the reporter concluded.

At five o'clock in the evening of the next day Manuel was sitting on the bench in the Botanical Gardens when Ernesto da Silva, wen on lip and walking stiff-legged like a cat, came stalking down the crushed-rock pathway between the palm trees.

He looked at Manuel in surprise and started to pass on. But Manuel, his lips loose and his muddy eyes striving for an appearance of moronic stupidity, said, "Senhor Ernesto?"

Ernesto paused uncertainly, more surprised than ever. Manuel stood up and handed him a slip of paper. "My Uncle send," he muttered.

Ernesto unfolded the paper and read:

> This dolt knows nothing but your name. Give him what you have for me and he will bring it to me. An important funeral prevents my getting away. Did you read the newspapers yesterday?

There was no signature. And Manuel was virtually certain that Ernesto had never known Gomez' handwriting.

A relieved grin spread over Ernesto's face. He took a thick envelope from his pocket and handed it to Manuel. "Here," he said, "for your Uncle. Uncle. Understand? Take it to your Uncle." He addressed Manuel as though he were mentally retarded, so Manuel decided his pretense had been spectacularly successful.

He nodded at Ernesto and allowed saliva to dribble unheeded from one corner of his loose mouth. He turned away and walked out of the

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Gardens, leaving Ernesto behind him. In a taxi, ten minutes later, he counted the money in the envelope.

It was the balance of Gomez' million cruzeiros.

Manuel waited another day before he made the anonymous telephone call that put him in touch with Rodolfo. When he recognized Rodolfo's voice on the wire, he said, "This is The Photographer. Same place, Rodolfo. Tomorrow, at ten," and rang off.

They met in the Rua do Ouvidor as usual, went to the same café for *cafezinho*. They sat in an isolated booth. Rodolfo's eyes were bulging. Otherwise he looked the same.

Manuel was very businesslike. He took a photographic print from his pocket and handed it across the table to Rodolfo. The picture was beautifully sharp and clear: Gomez, dead in the wicker chair with a knife in his heart. "The proof," said Manuel. "Will you show it to your principal and obtain the balance due me?"

Rodolfo looked long at the picture. At length he said, "Yes." His face was closed and secret, his mouth a tight line. Then, noncommittally, he said, "Your studio was destroyed."

Manuel nodded. "Completely," he agreed. "But I shall suffer no loss, happily. It was fully insured. I can find another."

Rodolfo said, "You perished in the fire."

Manuel replied, "No, that was a tragic accident—a case of incorrect identification. I went to Sao Paulo for a few days, and lent my studio to a friend while I was gone. A friend named Gomez. He wanted it for some—ah—romantic assignation, I believe. It was he who died in my bed, poor fellow."

Rodolfo went to the heart of the matter. "Sao Paulo?"

"Yes. I have a friend there who will confirm that I was visiting him. There is nothing to worry about, Rodolfo."

"I see." Rodolfo allowed his long lips to curl upward in a rather oily smile. "I think I can guarantee that there will be no difficulty about the balance we owe you, Photographer." He tapped the photograph and put it out of sight. "Your proof is incontrovertible. I'll have the money for you tomorrow." He finished his coffee and made ready to rise. Then he hesitated, apparently struck by another thought.

"By the way," he said, beginning to write with a pencil on the rim of the menu between them. "I have your next assignment for you. The same rate. But an easier job. This one *is* a fool."

He turned the menu so that Manuel could read what he had written.

The name was Ernesto da Silva.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**RICK RUBIN**
TITLE:	***Alpine Assignment***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	John Wilchek
LOCALE:	Neufurt—in the Alps
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Wilchek, the insurance detective, hated his boss, his wife, and perhaps most of all, his work: a lifetime of dirty jobs, and nothing to show for it . . .*

THE LAST LEG OF THE TRIP TO Neufurt is by narrow-gauge mountain railway, so at 3:30 in the morning John Wilchek has to transfer from the well padded warmth of the regular national railway to the wooden benches of the third-class local train. It is cold and damp and he is tired, and the train change is another inconvenience, another insult to his tired body. Wilchek curses his boss and the insurance company he works for as a detective and the diamond thief he is following. He gathers coat and hat and suitcase and changes at the deserted little station.

Probably Josef Molte won't be in Neufurt anyway, Wilchek thinks. Some fool of a small-town policeman is probably making a mistake. They've had a dozen leads on Molte at the office, why should this be the true one? But this is the one the boss sent him on, so he has to run it down. Has to change trains at abominable hours and bump his bones on damn little mountain trains and in the end find some perfectly respectable foreigner, a tourist, and then go back to the city. And only an upset stomach to show for his efforts.

And of course he can't sleep on the local train. Too cold, too bumpy and noisy and crowded with smelly peasants. Damn Molte! A young, handsome, dashing fellow who's got away with three or four other jobs nearly as big as this one. No income

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tax and no boss and rich before he's thirty. A cool million Dutch guilders, Amsterdam exchange value. Or a hundred thousand English pounds, if you want to look at it that way, or a quarter of a million American dollars, or . . . oh, hell, a damn fortune in any country or currency!

And after all the other detectives are out on the easy, comfortable leads, they send John Wilchek off into the mountains on the most improbable lead of all . . . Some day he'll get even with them for all this. Never a promotion, never a nice desk to work behind, never even a word of praise.

The train climbs higher into the mountains, all the world black outside. Wilchek tries to doze in his seat, his hat over his eyes, but it's no use. Finally the train pulls into Neufurt.

Wilchek shakes off the little fuzziness of sleep he's attained. He grabs his suitcase and climbs off the train. The depot is strictly for the tourists, quaintly Alpine with peasant wall-paintings of trees and mountains and blowsy village girls. He goes through the Waiting Room to the Men's Room and splashes water on his face, then combs his thinning hair. The mirror gives him back the image of a middle-aged man, on the chunky side now with hanging jowls and lackluster, tired eyes. Nobody's going to mistake you for an important somebody, John Wilchek, he thinks.

It's still dark outside when he comes out of the station and the street is deserted except for one cab, the driver dozing behind the wheel. Wilchek knocks on the glass and the taxi driver jolts awake.

"Where to, sir?" the driver says.

"Where's the Poste Hotel?" Wilchek says.

"Hop in and I'll take you there," the driver says.

"I don't need a taxi to go a block or two. Just tell me where it is."

The driver's face turns sullen. "Block up, half a block to the right," he says, gesturing vaguely with a thumb. He slumps back down behind the wheel.

Wilchek is irritated. He would have tipped the fellow out of his own funds. The boss would never stand for a taxi on his account. But the driver acted like an animal. All right, that's his tough luck.

Wilchek picks up his suitcase and starts for the hotel. The sky is beginning to brighten and he can make out the high mountains south and east of the town. The last range before the border, and this is the last town. Maybe Molte is here after all, making a run for the border. Wilchek's stomach tightens a little.

The Poste Hotel is hewn stone with a fairly impressive lobby and antique charm. Behind the desk a sloppy-looking clerk sleeps on a chair. The detective looks at him for a minute, then gives the service bell a couple of taps.

The clerk jumps up out of sleep

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and is on his feet before his eyes are fully open. "Yes, sir, you'd like a room, sir?" he says.

"I'm a detective," Wilchek says, flashing his card. The clerk is suddenly awake. "I want some information."

"At your service, sir."

"You've got a man registered here under the name of Josef Molte?"

The clerk pulls out the register and checks. "Room 131, sir," he says.

"Good. Have you seen the man? What does he look like?"

"I haven't seen him," the clerk says. "I'm on night duty only."

"All right," Wilchek says. "I want to see the manager."

"Oh, the manager is asleep. I couldn't . . ."

"This is important business," Wilchek says. "Millions at stake."

"But it's only five thirty. Surely it can wait a while?"

"Get with it or there'll be a charge of aiding a criminal against you."

The clerk scurries off like a frightened rabbit, and Wilchek grins. These desk clerks are all alike—all for preserving order at anyone's expense, until it sounds as if they might get into trouble.

In a minute the clerk is back, and in a couple more the manager appears, a skinny fellow with a pencil-line mustache, gathering his dignity around him to cover his faded bathrobe and worn slippers. "What's this all about?" he says.

"A guest of yours," Wilchek says. "Uses the name of Josef Molte. We have word that he may have stolen a considerable amount of jewels."

"Ah, that's serious then. What can I do for you?"

"First off, do you know the man? I want to know what he looks like. Then, how long he's been here, what kind of luggage—anything else you know."

The manager consults a file drawer. "Yes, I remember the fellow," he says. "Good-looking chap, well dressed. Well behaved."

"I wouldn't doubt it. What does he look like?"

"Oh, slim and on the tall side. Dark hair, medium length. Dark eyes I think. Rather a thin face, but handsome—almost like a film star's. No scars that I can remember. Talked with a French accent, I believe."

"Good enough," Wilchek says. "That fits. How long has he been here?"

"Several weeks. Here for the skiing. Likes to go off on the trails."

"Yes, he would. Studying the way toward the border, I'll bet."

"The border? Why, yes, there is a trail leading that way."

"Now listen," Wilchek says. "Did he go off on a little trip? On the train, I mean. Two or three days, leaving his things here. Just back yesterday?"

"Yes, that's right," the manager says.

"Well, he spent those days stealing a fortune in diamonds, and I

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believe he plans to cross the border with them. But his little game is up. Come on, lets go up and see this Molte fellow."

"You're sure he's the fellow who stole the jewels? I can't disturb a guest at this hour on mere suspicion."

"Suspicion nothing," Wilchek says. "He fits in every particular."

The manager goes to the key rack. "Hello, there's a message here," he says. He lifts a slip of paper from the hook and reads it. "Too late," he says. "Molte left word to be called at three thirty this morning."

"Damn him," Wilchek says, turning to the desk clerk. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I didn't . . . I wasn't aware . . ." the desk clerk stammers. His face is white.

"Off for the border with a two-hour lead!" Wilchek says.

"Perhaps not," the manager says. "Maybe we can catch him yet."

"You've got a helicopter hidden on the roof maybe?" Wilchek says.

"We'll get you skis and gather some of the local men and go after him," the manager says. "It's five hours to the border the way he's going."

"Five hours with better than a two-hour lead," Wilchek says.

"Five if you climb all the way," the manager says. "Only three from the top of the chairlift. We'll start the lift and perhaps you can overtake him."

The manager becomes a dynamo of action. Skis and boots and poles and a parka are found, the chairlift operator is called, and Wilchek hears a description of the topography between Neufurt and the border. But when the manager starts to call for men to go along, Wilchek stops him. Without quite understanding why, he feels that he must be alone on the mountain with Molte. He says that collecting a party will take too much time, and the manager agrees with him.

Then Wilchek laces on his boots and dons his parka and they race to the bottom of the chairlift, where a sleepy-eyed villager is warming the motor.

"I'll keep it running long enough for you to reach the top," the lift operator says. "About half an hour."

Then he is on the chair and the lift is humming and the cable above him moves up the slope, while the town falls away behind him.

There has been a foot or more of heavy, wet new snow the night before, and the slopes are covered and smoothed by it. Water drips down on Wilchek as he passes under the lift towers, and around him he can hear the drip and crack of snow melting. To the east the sky is pink, and the lift climbs up the range of mountains toward it. The towers stretch far ahead into the distance.

After ten minutes he sees a single pair of ski tracks climbing toward and then parallel with the ski lift.

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That's Molte, he thinks; he's the one all right. That's no early morning exercise—he's off like a shot for the border.

Behind him the village is now a collection of toy houses. Only half an hour behind, he thinks, and I'll be fresher than he is. But I'll lack sleep, and I'm a lot older than the boy-wonder jewel thief. He feels tired suddenly. Well, he thinks, the sun will be up soon and I'll feel better.

He reaches the top of the lift and the ski tracks of his quarry stretch on ahead. He gets off the lift and stops only for a moment to tighten his bindings, and then sets off at a slow, warmup pace. In a little while he feels his muscles loosen and he speeds up, and finally he is climbing at a steady, mile-eating pace.

He reviews the topography of the pass as the manager has described it. Ahead of him are a long series of rises until just below the peak of the range, where he turns and traverses parallel to the summit. There the going may get rough, for he must cross a series of avalanche gullies, and this is avalanche weather. After the last of the avalanche gullies there is only a short dash up the last steep slope to the pass, and then a long downhill slope on the other side.

If he doesn't catch his man before the pass he will never catch him, for down the other side, just a few minutes away, is the border, and past that the first village of the next country, where the thief will have protection. On the far side of the border they don't give a damn whose laws you've broken as long as it isn't their own. And if you bring a fortune in diamonds you can break a few of their laws too.

I'll have to catch him before the pass, Wilchek thinks, and speeds up.

But he is already tired, and he feels the exertion of climbing and the weight of the skis. He was quite a skier in his youth, but it has been years since he last skied. I'll have an aching body tonight, he thinks.

Now the sun is up, but rather than cheering him it blinds him, for he is climbing directly into it. Already it is warm. He takes off the parka and ties it around his waist, and stops to rest and check his pistol.

Then he is off again, but the refreshment of the pause soon grinds away in the tiring work of climbing. Damn them all to hell, he thinks, they should have sent a younger man. But they always give me the dirty ones. I never get the breaks like the other fellows do, or the credit either. I'll be just an insurance detective until I die, and I'll never make a decent salary or have a desk of my own. And my wife will never stop nagging or my children stop demanding things. Damn them all—particularly the boss, sitting smug and comfortable behind his desk. If I catch this Molte he'll take the credit and I'll just get the next dirty assignment.

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He is following the track the thief has made, saving energy by letting Molte break trail and presumably gaining on the fellow. And skiing in the same track, he thinks ahead, remembering what he knows of Molte. One of those smart young fellows who has the world in the palm of his hand. Good education, good family, too smart and too lazy to work. Too smart to get sucked into the ratrace, he's spent his time with the girls and pulled a job only when he felt like it. The one in Paris—a real haul, that one! In Hamburg, another. Even in Bristol, England. Never have got the goods on him. And why not? That's the sort of world it is. You used to be able to tell the thieves from the honest people, but since the war the honest people steal more than the thieves, and the thieves are all bright young men with good educations.

Honest or dishonest. And what do I have to show for a life of being honest, Wilchek thinks. Nothing. While Molte works once in a while and is rich. And he hasn't a boss, or a nagging wife. Has the pick of the girls. Damn it, all my life being honest and where am I? And why am I honest? Habit. I don't really give a damn for people and laws and governments.

And now I'm chasing a man who has a fortune, and if I catch him I'm expected to bring him back. Good boy, Wilchek, they'll say, and pat me on the head.

Wilchek works himself into a rage, considering the injustice of it. And suddenly he thinks, well, who says I'll bring the diamonds back? I've never had a chance like this one, and I'll never have one again. Why should Molte have all the fun? Yes, by God, a lifetime on the right side of the law, and nothing to show for it. Well, I'll show them. Yes, by God, I'll do it. And then over the border to safety.

He speeds up again and tops the last rise to find the traverse ahead of him. It's going to be sticky work, he thinks. Far below to his left is the valley, and to his right the slope rises steeply to the rocky crags of the summit. Ahead of him the thief's track leads across the steep slope of the avalanche gully to the next ridge.

He sets out across the first gully, conscious of the wet heaviness of the snow, the new snow unstable on top of the old snow, the old snow also thawing and ready to slide. One wrong move, one fall, even one loud noise, and off you go, buried in a million tons of snow. Some peasant will find you in the summer.

The thief's track makes an easy path for Wilchek and he knows that he is gaining—the tracks of the other man's skis are still crisp and unmelted. He tops the first ridge and starts across the second gully and halfway across finds a cigarette where the thief has thrown it, not even fully watersoaked.

And topping the next ridge he sees

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his quarry, halfway out across the third avalanche gully.

For a moment Wilchek simply stands and looks at Molte, a slim figure in well-cut ski clothes with a bulky rucksack on his back, pushing laboriously through the heavy new snow. He sees that this is the last gully before the final climb to the pass. He has caught the man just in time.

He has never felt like this before, his stomach churning, his head pounding. But he has never had so much at stake before. Softly now, he cautions himself. In a conversational tone of voice he calls out, "Stop where you are, Josef Molte."

Molte stops almost in mid-stride and turns his head.

Wilchek pulls out his pistol and flicks off the safety. "I've got you covered," he says. "No getting across the border now."

With a quick movement Molte pulls a pistol from his parka.

"Hold it!" Wilchek snaps. "One shot and the avalanche it sets off will smother you in a million tons of snow."

The thief looks up the slope toward the rocky peak and then down toward the valley. After a short hesitation he puts the pistol back in his pocket. "Looks like you have me, all right," he says. "May I ask whom I have the honor of being caught by?"

"I'm from the insurance company. That's all you need to know."

"Ah, an insurance detective," Molte says. His voice is soft and urbane, and the cultured accent annoys Wilchek.

"All right, come on back this way," Wilchek says.

"I'd rather not. But I'll make a deal with you. I value my freedom far more than these diamonds, and you're more interested in recovering the loss. So I'll leave the diamonds here and you can come and get them when I'm gone."

"No deal," Wilchek says. "What do you take me for, a fool? How would I know what you'd put there? A bag of rocks most likely."

"These are the diamonds," the thief says. He pulls a brown sack out of his parka and balances it on his hand. "You can take my word of honor on it."

Wilchek's heart gives a leap. "Word of honor," he mocks. "What's honor to a thief? You come back this way."

"Why should I? If you want the gems come and get them."

"I told you I might start an avalanche," Wilchek says.

"If you shoot, detective, my last act will be to scatter the stones. You'll never find them. If you want both them and me you'll have to come and get us."

To prove his point the thief opens the sack and holds it ready to scatter the stones.

Damn the impudent fellow, Wilchek thinks. He has me there.

The detective stands there, trying to decide—weighing the danger of

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going down into the gully against his impotence as long as he stands here on the ridge. Then he starts down into the gully.

The thief does a neat kick turn to face Wilchek. Then he lights a cigarette with a gold lighter and puffs contentedly. He holds the bag of diamonds on one hand, by the bottom of the bag. He is a smiling young rogue, suntanned, poised, sure of himself.

I'll make you dance another tune, Wilchek thinks.

"Well, here we are," the thief says, laughing quietly. "Now what?"

"Give me the diamonds," Wilchek says.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"If you don't give them to me . . ."

"You'll what? Shoot me? Then you'll die with me in the avalanche. Take them by brute force? You're not big enough, and if we struggle the whole slope will go. No, I'm afraid we've reached an impasse, my detective friend."

Wilchek realizes that his coming down into the gully was a tactical error. The thief's grinning face makes him furious. "Give me the diamonds, damn you," he snarls.

He is ready to hurl himself at the man—but of course that is ridiculous. They'd both go, and the mountainside with them. But the diamonds are his, by right of too many years of working and sweating without reward.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Molte says. "I'll split them with you. Fifty-fifty. Then we can both go on across the border."

"Give me the diamonds and I'll let you go free," Wilchek says.

"Impossible," the thief says. "Look at it from my view. You can't force me to come back with you. And if you follow me and try to shoot me, I have an even chance. But if we split them evenly, there's a way out for both of us. Otherwise, we just stand here."

If I get the diamonds, I can go back and say I didn't get the man, Wilchek thinks. Or better yet, I can kill him and cross the border myself. But I can't do anything in this avalanche gully.

"Give me the diamonds and I'll let you go free," he offers again.

"Why should I trust you? You'd probably try to take me in anyway. Or take the gems across the border yourself. But I stole them and I deserve at least half. Be sensible and we'll split fifty-fifty."

But if I do take half of them, Wilchek thinks, and then go across the border with the man, I can take care of him later and have them all. So much money, and the escape route so close. And yet I have spent all my life on the other side of the law. But for what? For a nagging wife and a boss and a sick stomach. Better settle for half.

"Fifty-fifty?" Wilchek says.

"Right down the middle," the thief says.

Yes, Wilchek thinks, I'll cross the

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border with the fellow and then get him while he's not looking and collect the other half. Leave him in the snow somewhere. And no more day-after-day drudgery and abuse.

"Yes," he says, "Yes, I'll do it."

"I thought you might," Molte says. "Underneath, you're as much of a crook as I am. More in fact, since you're being paid to bring the diamonds back, while I'm just a thief and no one expects me to be honest."

"Fifty-fifty," Wilchek says, licking his lips. A villa in the sun, any girl he wants. His mouth is dry and his heart beats like a triphammer.

"The devil with it," the thief says. "I've changed my mind. I don't trust you—you'd probably try to kill me for the rest. It's only thieves who are honest any more."

With a sudden flip of his wrist he swings the brown bag outward toward the valley below and diamonds spill in a wide arc, glittering in the sun, and drop into the snow.

"There are plenty more where those came from," the thief says. "If you want some, go steal them like an honest man."

The diamonds disappear in the snow and Wilchek wants to scramble after them. Gone! They will never be found, even in the spring when the snow melts. Even the peasants won't be able to find them. Gone! The dream of a life of freedom—freedom from his job and boss and wife and sour stomach. The superior young swine, throwing away a fortune! Insulting Wilchek and calling him a criminal. Gone!

Now there is only hate. Molte has stolen everything the detective ever hoped for, and adding insult, stands there laughing at him!

Wilchek brings the pistol to the level of Molte's chest and squeezes the trigger.

The young man's face turns paste-white, and his mouth opens in horror and surprise. A red stain marks his chest.

And for once in his life Wilchek feels triumphant over the entire world. He is the king, the victor over his lifelong enemies. And then he feels the snow slipping away beneath his skis and hears the express-train roar in his ears, and looking up he sees the whole mountainside slipping away from the rocks above and boiling savagely down on him in a tidal wave of roaring snow . . .

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In his time John O'Hara has been many things—engineer, ship steward, railroad freight clerk, gas meter reader, guard in an amusement park, laborer in a steel mill, soda clerk, press agent, reporter, movie critic, football editor (for "The New Yorker"), and once, in the patchwork of his vocations and avocations, secretary to Heywood Broun.

Mr. O'Hara's first book, APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA, *was an immediate and sensational success. Yet Mr. O'Hara wrote the opening 25,000 words of this sensitive and moving novel in a furnished room in New York, using his bed as a desk. When he was down to total resources of $3—between him and starvation, between his unfinished manuscript and fame—he sought help to finish his book, and Harcourt, Brace & Company were so impressed by the incomplete manuscript that they paid O'Hara's board and lodging until* APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA *appeared, and startled and astounded the critics.*

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THE PUBLIC CAREER OF MR. SEYMOUR HARRISBURG

by JOHN O'HARA

SEYMOUR M. HARRISBURG PUT away the breakfast dishes and took off his wife's apron and hung it in the kitchen closet. He frowned at the clock, the face of which was an imitation dinner plate, and the hands of which were a knife and fork. He tiptoed to the bedroom, put on his vest, coat, and hat, and with one glance at the vast figure of his wife he went to the door of the apartment.

Opening the door he looked down and saw, lying on the floor, the half-clad body of Leatrice Devlin, the chorus girl who lived in the adjoining apartment.

Thus began the public career of Seymour M. Harrisburg.

Miss Devlin was quite dead, a

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fact which Mr. Harrisburg determined by placing his hand above her heart. His hand roved so that no mistake was possible. The body was clad in a lacy negligee, and part of Miss Devlin's jaw had been torn away by a bullet or bullets, but she had not been disfigured beyond recognition.

Mr. Harrisburg, observing that there was some blood on his hand, wanted to run away, but it was five flights down to the street in the automatic elevator. Then his clear conscience gave him courage and he returned to his apartment and telephoned for the police.

He readily agreed not to touch anything and not to leave, and sat down to smoke a cigarette. He became frightened when he thought of what was lying on the other side of the door, and in desperation he went to the bedroom and shook his wife.

"Get the hell out of here," said Mrs. Harrisburg.

"But, Ella," said Mr. Harrisburg. "The girl next door, the Devlin girl, she's been murdered."

"Get out of here, and leave me sleep."

His repetition of the news finally convinced Mrs. Harrisburg, and she sat up and ordered him to fetch her bathrobe. He explained what he had come upon, and then, partly from his recollection of what he had seen, and partly from the complicated emotion which his wife's body aroused, he became ill. He was in the bathroom when the police arrived.

They questioned him at some length, frankly suspicious and openly skeptical until the officer in charge finally said, "Aw, puup, we can't get anything out of this mugg. He didn't do it anyhow." Then as an afterthought: "You sure you didn't hear anything like shots? Automobile backfiring. Nothing like that? Now think!"

"No, I swear honest to God, I didn't hear a thing."

Shortly after the officers completed the preliminary examination, the medical examiner arrived and announced that the Devlin woman had been dead at least four hours, placing her death at about 3 A.M.

Mr. Harrisburg was taken to the police station and submitted to further questioning. He was permitted to telephone his place of employment, the accounting department of a cinema-producing corporation, to explain his absence. He was photographed by four casual young men from the press. At a late hour in the afternoon he was permitted to go home.

His wife, who also had been questioned by the police, had not missed the point of the early questions which had been put to Mr. Harrisburg. Obviously they had implied that there might have been a liaison between her husband and Miss Devlin. She looked at him again and again as he began to make dinner. To think that a hardboiled man

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like that cop could have believed for one minute that a woman like Devlin would have anything to do with Seymour . . .

But he *had* thought it: Mrs. Harrisburg wondered about Seymour. She recalled that before their marriage he was one of the freshest little heels she ever had known. Could it be possible that he had not changed?

"Aah, nuts," she finally said aloud. Devlin wouldn't have let him get to first base. She ate the meal in silence, and after dinner she busied herself with a bottle of gin, as was her postprandial custom.

Mr. Harrisburg, too, had noticed the trend of the official questions, and during the preparation of the meal he gave much speculative thought to the late Miss Devlin. He wondered what would have happened if he had tried to get somewhere with her. He had seen two or three of the men she had entertained in her apartment, and he felt that he did not have to take a back seat for any of them. He deeply regretted the passing of Miss Devlin before he had had an opportunity to get around to her.

At the office next morning Mr. Harrisburg realized that the power of the press has not been exaggerated. J. M. Slotkin himself, vice-president in charge of sales, spoke to Mr. Harrisburg in the elevator. "Quite a thing you had at your place yesterday," said Mr. Slotkin.

"Yes, it sure was," said Mr. Harrisburg.

Later, after he had seated himself at his desk, Mr. Harrisburg was informed that he was wanted in the office of Mr. Adams, head of the accounting department.

"Quite a thing you had at your place yesterday," said Mr. Adams.

"Yes, it sure was," said Mr. Harrisburg. "Geez, I'll never forget it, reaching down and feeling her heart not beating. Her skin was like ice. Honest, you don't know what it is to touch a woman's skin and she's dead."

At Mr. Adams' request Mr. Harrisburg described in detail all that had taken place the preceding day.

"Well, you sure got in all the papers this morning, I noticed," said Mr. Adams. "Pictures in every one of them."

This was inaccurate, but certainly Mr. Harrisburg's picture had been in five papers.

"Yes," said Mr. Harrisburg, not knowing whether the company applauded this type of publicity.

"Well, I guess it's only a question of time before they get the man that did it. So any time you want time off to testify, why, only say the word. I guess they'll want you down at headquarters, eh? And you'll have to appear at the trial. I'll be only too glad to let you have the time off. Just so you keep me posted," said Mr. Adams with a smile.

Throughout the day Mr. Harrisburg could not help noticing how frequently the stenographers found

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it necessary to go to the pencil sharpener near his desk. They had read the papers, too, and they had not missed the hints in two of the smaller-sized journals that Mr. Harrisburg knew more than he had told the police. Hardly a moment passed when Mr. Harrisburg could not have looked up from his work and caught the eye of a young woman on himself.

At lunch time Mr. Harrisburg was permitted and urged to speak of his experiences. The five men with whom he lunched almost daily were respectfully attentive and curious. Mr. Harrisburg, inspired, gave many details which he had not told the police.

The only unpleasant feature of the day was his meeting with Miss Reba Gold. Miss Gold and Mr. Harrisburg for months had been meeting after business hours in a dim bar near the office, and they met this day. After the drinks had been served and the waiter had departed, Mr. Harrisburg got up and moved to Miss Gold's side of the booth. He put his arm around her waist and took her chin in his hand and kissed her.

She roughly moved away. "Take your hands off me," she said.

"Why, Reba, what's the matter?" said Mr. Harrisburg.

"What's the matter? You don't think I didn't get it what they said in the papers this morning. You and that Devitt or whatever her name is. Ain't I got eyes?"

"Geez, you don't mean to tell me you believe that stuff. You don't mean to tell me that?"

"I certainly do. The papers don't print stuff like that if it ain't true. You could sue them for liable if it wasn't true, and I don't hear you saying you're going to sue them."

"Aw, come on, don't be like that," said Mr. Harrisburg. He noticed that Miss Gold's heart was beating fast.

"Take your hands off me," she said. "I and you are all washed up. It's bad enough you having a wife, without you should be mixed up with a chorus girl. What am I, a dummy, I should let you get away with that?"

"Aw, don't be like that," said Mr. Harrisburg. "Let's have a drink and then go to your place."

"Not me. Now cut it out and leave me go. I and you are all washed up, see?"

Miss Gold refused to be placated, and Mr. Harrisburg permitted her, after a short struggle, to depart. When she had gone he ordered another drink and sat alone with his thoughts of Miss Devlin, with whose memory he rapidly was falling in love.

The next day he purchased a new suit of clothes. He had been considering the purchase, but it now had become too important a matter for further postponement. What with being photographed and interviewed, and the likelihood of further appearances in the press,

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he felt he owed it to himself to look his best. He agreed with his wife that she likewise was entitled to sartorial protection against the cruelty of the camera, and he permitted her to draw $200 out of their joint savings account.

In the week that followed, Mr. Harrisburg made several public or semi-public appearances at police headquarters and other official haunts. He was photographed each time, for The Devlin Mystery had few enough characters who could pose.

The publicity increased Mr. Harrisburg's prestige at the office, Mr. Adams being especially kind and highly attentive each time Mr. Harrisburg returned to tell what line of questioning the authorities were pursuing. Miss Gold alone was not favorably impressed. She remained obdurate. But Mr. Harrisburg had found that Mr. Adams' secretary, who was blonde, was pleased to accompany Mr. Harrisburg to the nearby bar, and was not at all the upstage person she seemed to be in the office.

Then one day the police investigation began to have results.

A Miss Curley, who had been one of the late Miss Devlin's intimates, admitted to the police that Miss Devlin had telephoned her the night of the murder. Miss Devlin had been annoyed by her former husband, one Scatelli, who had made threats against her life, according to Miss Curley. The night of the murder Miss Devlin had said over the telephone to Miss Curley: "Joe's around again, damn him, and he wants me to go back and I told him nuts. He's coming up tonight."

Miss Curley explained that she had not spoken earlier in the case because Scatelli was a gangster and she was afraid of him. Scatelli was arrested in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Mr. Harrisburg appeared before the Grand Jury, and it was after his appearance, when he was leaving the Grand Jury room with an Assistant District Attorney that he first suspected that his news value had suffered as a result of Miss Curley's disclosures. For when he read the next day's newspapers he found only the barest mention of his name in one lone newspaper.

Miss Curley, on the other hand, was all over the papers. Not only were there photographs of the young lady as she appeared after giving testimony, but the drama departments had resurrected several pictures which showed Miss Curley holding a piece of black velvet in front of her fair white form, and several others in which she was draped in feathers. Scatelli's rogues' gallery likenesses received some space.

The baseball season had become interesting, and Mr. Harrisburg could not help noticing that at luncheon the following day his colleagues' sole comment on the Devlin murder was that they saw where

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the police got that guy that did it. The remainder of the conversation was devoted to satirical remarks about the Brooklyns.

In the afternoon, after hours, Mr. Harrisburg waited for Mr. Adams' secretary, but she left with Mr. Adams. Miss Gold walked past him without so much as a how-do-you-do. Passed him up cold.

Mr. Harrisburg did not feel that this state of affairs could continue, and when the case came to trial he was smartly clad and nodded a friendly nod to the cameramen. Their faces were blank in response, but Mr. Harrisburg knew that they would come around at the proper time.

However, when he gave his testimony the attorney for the defendant caused mild laughter with his tripping up Mr. Harrisburg. Mr. Harrisburg, describing the finding of the body, declared that Miss Devlin's chest was like marble, it was so cold; and that he had taken away his hand and found warm sticky blood on his fingers. The defense attorney suggested that Mr. Harrisburg was of more importance as a poet than as a witness, a suggestion with which the Assistant District Attorney secretly concurred. Getting down from the witness stand, Mr. Harrisburg looked hesitantly at the photographers, but they did not ask him to remain.

Mr. Harrisburg's press the following morning did not total more than forty agate lines, and of pictures of him there were none. There was something wrong, surely, and he was lost in pondering this phenomenon when he was summoned to Mr. Adams' office.

"Now listen, Harrisburg," said Mr. Adams. "I think we've been pretty generous about time off, considering the depression and all that. So I just wanted to remind you, this murder case is all through as far as you're concerned, and the less we hear about it from now on, why, the better. We have to get some work done around here, and I understand the men are getting pretty tired of hearing you talk and talk and talk about this all the time. I've even had complaints from some of the stenographers, so a word to the wise."

Mr. Harrisburg was stunned. He stopped to talk to Mr. Adams' secretary, but all she had to say was: "I'm busy, Seymour. But I want to tell you this: you want to watch your step."

She refused to meet him that afternoon, and by her tone she seemed to imply "or any other afternoon."

At luncheon Mr. Harrisburg was still so amazed that one of his colleagues said, "What's the matter, can't you talk about anything but that murder, Seymour? You ain't said a word."

Nor was there an improvement in the days that followed. Even one impertinent office boy told Mr. Harrisburg pointedly that he was glad

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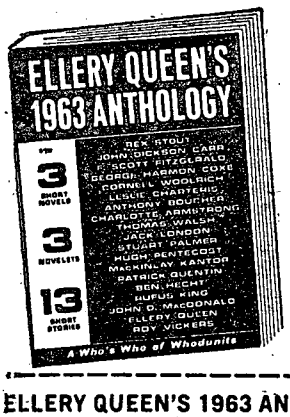
Scatelli was going to get the chair, because he was sick of hearing about the case. Mr. Harrisburg began to feel that the whole office staff was against him, and this so upset him that he made a mistake which cost the company $2000.

"I'm sorry, Harrisburg," said Mr. Adams, "but you're just no good to us since that murder, so you'll have to go."

It was the next day, after he had passed the morning looking for another job, and the afternoon at a Broadway burlesque show, that Mr. Harrisburg came home and found a note tucked in his bankbook.

The bankbook indicated that Mrs. Harrisburg had withdrawn all but ten dollars from their joint account, and the note told him that she had departed with a man whom she frequently entertained of an afternoon. "I should of done this four years ago," wrote Mrs. Harrisburg.

Mr. Harrisburg went to the kitchen, and found that she had not even left him any gin.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.**

TITLE: ***Death in His Eyes***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Riverton, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *When Ronny was a child, her eyes held an irrepressible, mischievous sparkle. But when Ronny grew up, her eyes changed—and they could see death in other eyes.*

SHE CAME JOGGLING ALONG THE river path, perched precariously sidesaddle on a graying pony whose forward progress was made up almost entirely of swaying jerks and lunges. An old bulldog trotted behind her, wheezing and panting.

Gene Travers was standing in the doorway of his gasoline station. He tilted his cap and scratched fretfully at his own graying head while he gaped at this apparition from the distant past.

The girl laughed merrily. "Hello, Old Man!" she called.

"I'll be derned!" Travers exclaimed. "Why, it's—it's—"

"You used to call me the Imp," she said. She halted the pony beside him and slipped down lightly. "You look just the same, except now you're older."

"You've aged a little yourself," Travers said with a grin. "You aren't an imp any longer. You're a regular young lady. Why, it must be ten years—"

"At least," she said gravely.

Suddenly she threw her arms around him and gave his bewhiskered cheek a resounding kiss. As he reeled backward, she darted away, with the dog limping in resentful pursuit. A moment later she called to him from the boat dock. "Do you still sell those little fish?"

"Minnows," Travers called back. "Sure. And night crawlers. And crabs. All kinds of bait, just like the sign says. And the boats are still for rent."

She hopped delightedly from boat to boat while the dog watched from the dock, wagging its stub of a tail.

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"Everything is just the same," she said. She jumped back to the dock and knelt to splash one hand in the lazily drifting water. "Just the same," she said again. "I was afraid it wouldn't be."

She ran quickly back up the stone steps and turned at the top to clap her hands at the lagging dog. Her face was flushed; her eyes held the irrepressible, mischievous sparkle he so well remembered. Time's magic wand had made a grown woman of her—in a day, it seemed—but it had been a futile gesture. Imp she was, and Imp she would remain.

"How are things up at the house?" Travers asked.

"All right, I guess. I just got here."

"Plenty of changes there," Travers said. "It's Gloria—what's her husband's name? Grey?"

The girl made a face. "I don't like him. He scares me."

"He seems like a decent enough fellow."

She shook her head. "There's death in his eyes."

"Death!" Travers exclaimed.

She leaped onto the waiting pony. "I'll have to go. Gloria said Pal wouldn't let anyone ride him now, and I had to show her. But I'll be back."

She shook the reins, and then hauled back on them before the pony could take a step. "You know," she said, "since I was here before—since that summer—this is the first time I've been happy."

Travers watched them—plodding pony, limping and wheezing dog, waving girl—until the curving path carried them out of sight. Her voice floated back to him. "Goodbye, Old Man."

"The poor kid," Travers said softly. And then—"Death in his eyes. I wonder what the devil happened. She's a woman, now. Maybe the guy made a pass at her. But she said she'd just arrived. Queer."

He did not turn away until a car crunched across the gravel drive and honked twice at the pumps.

Her name was Veronica, but everyone called her Ronny. She was the adopted daughter of Chris Thornton, who was the ne'er-do-well brother of Jake Thornton, who owned at least a third of Bryan County as well as substantial hunks of the world at large. Chris was a cipher, a no-good nothing, but his wife had been a decent sort. When a cousin was killed in an automobile accident, Chris's wife prevailed on Chris to adopt the orphaned daughter.

Chris thought better of this almost as soon as it happened, and he foisted the girl off on Jake as an alleged companion to Jake's daughter, Gloria. Jake had been properly skeptical about the arrangement, since Ronny was only seven or eight, and of doubtful antecedents and upbringing, and Gloria was a thoroughly spoiled young lady of fifteen. But Chris had dumped Ronny at Jake's Wild Valley estate and de-

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parted before his slow-spoken brother could refuse. And there Ronny had spent one joyous summer, a glowing companion to everyone and everything for miles around except Gloria, who despised her.

She had taken to Pal, the pony, like a born horsewoman, and Muggs the bulldog followed her everywhere. Travers had been made aware of her existence when the three of them thundered down on him from the river path and circled wildly about the gasoline station with ear-shattering cheers and yips and shouts and barks.

"Hello, Old Man!" she had called. "Who are you?"

Before Travers could answer she leaped down and darted off to examine the dock and the boats. She flickered about, asking questions, inspecting everything, and he never quite got around to telling her his name. Through that entire summer she visited him two, or four, or ten times a day, and she always called him Old Man.

"*Old Man, what do you do with these little fish?*"

"*Those are minnows, Imp. I sell them to fishermen, for bait.*"

"*You mean—*" *A look of wide-eyed horror.* "*But—that's murder!*"

She had been a wan, scraggly little thing when he first saw her, but Jake's cook took her firmly in hand. She throve miraculously. Her frail legs became brown and sturdy, her thin cheeks filled out, and her sparkling vitality increased in geometrical proportions—as did her mischievousness.

"*Old Man, do you think Uncle Jake would mind—so very much—if I named this turtle after him?*"

She charmed every adult she met, and was charmed in turn by everyone and everything. Doc Morris, Riverton's dour philosopher, watched her antics for five minutes, then predicted, "That girl will come to no good end. She gets too much pleasure out of just being alive." Ronny stopped her play to gaze up at his scowling face and ask, "What's the matter? Do your feet hurt?"

"*I like you when you smile, Old Man. Your face goes all wrinkly and lovable.*"

Travers had never lost his own warm remembrance of that summer. He had no children of his own, and she was the only child he had ever loved . . .

Before the end of that summer Chris Thornton took up flying, and with his usual talent for bungling he promptly killed his wife and himself. For the second time in a few months Ronny was an orphan.

Rumor had it that Jake Thornton wanted to adopt her himself, but that Gloria refused to tolerate a rival and threw a whole series of her famous temper tantrums, and that Jake finally relented and packed Ronny off to an expensive private school.

Packed off to school she was, the first week of September—to a long series of schools, it turned out—and

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Travers did not see her again.

He asked Jake about her a year or so later. Jake shook his head. "She's a bright one," he said in his slow, massive way of talking. "Smart as a whip. Always the head of her class, but she doesn't get on with the other kids, and the teachers say she won't cooperate. She has nightmares, too, so she can't stay in a dormitory, and no one will room with her. I just don't know what to do with her."

Jake walked away, and Travers said angrily to himself, "Bring her back. All she needs is to belong to someone."

Jake died a short time later. Wild Valley languished in the indifferent hands of caretakers. Gloria remained away at school and took summer trips to Europe. She went to college. No one seemed to know what had happened to Ronny, though Travers thought, or at least hoped, that Jake had provided for her in his will

Then Gloria returned suddenly, with a brand-new husband. She restored Wild Valley, gave elaborate parties, and had crowds of odd guests down for week-ends.

And now Ronny was back. Travers had difficulty picturing the girl in the new atmosphere at Wild Valley. The few local people who had visited the estate reported that long-haired artists lurked in the shrubbery, musicians plunked and tinkled at odd hours, and bearded writers talked endlessly about unwritten books. Perhaps, in that queer atmosphere, the girl would be ignored—which was precisely what she needed.

She was back at the gas station the next morning, leading the pony this time, and carrying the dog. She said sadly, "I've grown up, but they've just grown old."

Travers nodded, and patted the dog. "He must be twelve or thirteen. That's quite an age for a bulldog."

"Yes. And Pal is twenty. He won't let anyone else ride him, and I guess I shouldn't have."

She stood looking forlornly out across the river. "I thought things hadn't changed," she said. "But they have."

"They always do," Travers said kindly.

"I guess so. Poor Muggs. I thought I was coming back to have fun with him, and I've just come back to see him die."

The dog stood looking up at her, wagging his tail when he heard her voice; the pony nosed her arm and snorted.

"You came back to make him happy," Travers said. "Muggs, and Pal—and me. You should be proud of that. Lots of people never make anyone happy."

There were tears in her eyes when she turned. "I like you, Old Man. Do you mind my calling you that?"

Travers grinned at her. "I never minded before, and now I am an old man. How are you getting along with Gloria?"

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"All right, I suppose. She's doing her duty by me. She's changed, too."

"And—her husband?"

"I don't like him. Have you seen the way he looks at Gloria?"

Travers shook his head.

"He married her for her money, didn't he?"

"Never thought about it," Travers said.

"I'm sure he did. It scares me to see him look at her like that."

"You've only known him for a day," Travers said. "You'll probably like him when you know him better."

"I don't want to know him better. There's death—"

She broke off and leaped down the steps to the dock. The dog followed her; the pony looked after them, and stomped a foot irritably. Ronny sprawled out on her stomach and gazed dreamily at the water—but only for a moment. Her restless, vibrant body could never remain still anywhere for more than a moment.

"Take a boat," Travers said, when he saw her jump to her feet. "It'll do you good. Best exercise there is."

"I don't know how. I don't even know how to swim."

"You can't upset one of these boats, and it won't take you long to learn how to row. Go ahead—give it a try. Take Number Seven."

He got her settled in Number 7, and gave the boat a helpful push. She floundered away downstream, with the dog perched happily in the bow. The pony snorted and started off down the river bank to follow them; Travers had to catch it and tie it up. She returned an hour later, rowing expertly.

"This is great!" she called. "I'll pay you for using the boat. Gloria gave me plenty of money, and I haven't anything to spend it on. Maybe I'll save up and buy a boat of my own."

Travers gave her a weekly rental rate on Number 7, and thereafter she spent her time on the river when the weather was good, and sometimes when it wasn't.

The arrangement pleased Travers, because it kept Ronny away from Wild Valley. He had never paid much attention to what happened at the estate, but now he began to take note of village gossip and to eye Gloria's guests disapprovingly.

"Death in his eyes." The thought disturbed Travers. Ronny possessed an unusual gift for observation, and if anything was wrong at Wild Valley she would sense it immediately. But why had she said it that way? "Death in his eyes."

Jim Bowman, the big and blustery county sheriff, stopped by for his week-end order of bait, and Travers asked him, "What do you know about this Walter Grey?"

"You mean Gloria Thornton's husband? Didn't know I was supposed to know anything about him."

"I was wondering if he's one of these fortune hunters."

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"If he is," Bowman said, "he sure had a successful hunt. I hear Gloria's worth five million dollars. At least."

Travers gloomily collected for three dozen night crawlers.

The sheriff picked up the can of bait, and said with a scowl, "I'll tell you this, though. If he married her for her money, he sure puts on a good act. Those two carry on like a couple of love-sick teenagers. I've seen 'em parked by the road, late at night when they're on their way back from somewhere. Strikes me as not being quite decent. If married people want to neck, they ought to wait till they get home."

The next day Travers tried again, with the Reverend Charles Stump.

"Grey?" the minister said. "I know very little about him. He and Gloria have been extremely generous in supporting our fund drives, but I don't believe they've attended services."

Travers said cautiously, "They get along all right, I suppose?"

"I've never seen a more devoted couple. But I do wish they'd attend church occasionally. They should be setting a good example for the young people, Gloria's position being what it is. And though they seem happy now, I frankly have fears for them. In the long run, a Godless marriage is never a happy one. If you have any influence with them . . ."

Travers hastily assured the minister that he had no influence.

Next he called on old Mrs. Hampton, who had overseen the manners and morals of Riverton and its population for more years than even she cared to remember. She gave Travers a hard look when he asked her about Grey.

"I don't rightly *know* anything about him," she said. "Folks say it's a wild crowd that he and Gloria entertain, but I notice that their guests behave well enough in town—better than Mr. and Mrs. Grey, I might point out. I've seen the two of them sparking in their car right on Main Street. As for what goes on at Wild Valley—well, those big-city servants Gloria's brought here don't talk much to the local people, which is probably just as well. Like I always say, where there's smoke, there's fire."

And that was as much as Travers was able to find out.

It remained only for him to talk to Grey himself, and this he managed at the village liquor store, which was the only local establishment Grey patronized with regularity.

"You're Walter Grey, aren't you?" Travers said. "Travers is my name. I run the filling station just below Wild Valley."

"I know," Grey said. "I've seen you there."

He gave Travers a friendly smile and shook his hand. Certainly there was nothing sinister about the man. He was about thirty, mild-looking and well-built, with eyes so palely blue that they appeared colorless. With his crewcut and checkered

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sports coat his appearance was that of a somewhat overage college boy.

"Ronny is an old friend of mine," Travers said. "How's she getting along?"

"Ronny? Oh." Grey shrugged. "Mrs. Grey wanted her here, so she's here. I don't see much of her."

"She's a fine girl," Travers said.

Grey shrugged again. "She's a crazy kid. But as long as she doesn't bother anyone, I won't complain."

The clerk returned, rang up $63.75 on the cash register, and handed Grey a package. Grey paid him, nodded to Travers, and left.

"Pretty good customer," Travers said. "Does he do that often?"

The clerk nodded. "He doesn't buy a lot, but it's all special orders—stuff like nobody around here ever heard of. Foreign wines, and things like that. They cost."

"I guess he can afford it," Travers said.

"His wife can, anyway. That's for sure. But the way I look at it, he's wasting the money. After the first few drinks that highfalutin' stuff tastes just like anything else."

Travers bought himself a carton of beer and thoughtfully walked back to his car.

A week went by, and then another week. Travers gave Ronny a fishing pole and taught her how to bait a hook. She steadfastly refused to use minnows for bait, but she felt no comparable tenderness for night crawlers. As a fisherman, however, she had very indifferent success, Travers suspected that she would not sit still long enough in one place to let the fish bite.

Something was troubling her. Her dark eyes took on a far-away, haunted expression that became more intense each day. Sometimes she did not seem to hear him when he spoke to her. She arrived dutifully at the same hour every morning, leading the pony and carrying the dog. She tied up the pony, then took out her boat with the dog as a contented passenger. Often she remained away the entire day, and as she brought no lunch with her Travers was not surprised that she began to lose weight.

"Look!" she said one morning. "It's started."

Travers stared at the container in her hand. "What is it?"

"Rat poison!"

He took the container—a cardboard cylinder with metal ends—and scrutinized it. "Well, it isn't exactly poison," he said. "There's no skull on it, or warning, and it doesn't say poison."

"It kills rats, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Travers said, reading the label. "It does that. It contains an anticoagulant, it says. Must thin out their blood, or something, and that kills them."

"Then it would kill people, too, wouldn't it?"

Travers scratched his head. "Well—"

"Gloria was sick this morning,"

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Ronny said. "I thought he wouldn't try anything as long as I'm here, but I was wrong." Her eyes were angry, her face pale. "I called the doctor. *He* didn't want me to, but I did."

"Doc Morris?"

She nodded.

"What did Doc say?"

"I don't know. *He* chased me away before the doctor got there."

"Well," Travers mused. "Rat poison—there are rats, you know. And this is doctored-up grain. It wouldn't be easy to get a person to eat it."

"All he'd have to do is grind it up and sprinkle some on Gloria's cereal every morning."

"Where'd you find this?"

"In a drawer in the gun room."

"Odd place to keep it."

"There isn't much gone," she said. "But there could have been other cans of it, maybe a lot of them. What would happen to a person who took a lot of this?"

Travers thought about it, and shuddered. "The blood wouldn't coagulate. One little cut and a person might bleed to death. But no one but a fiend—"

"*He's* a fiend," Ronny said confidently.

"What are you going to do with this?"

"Will you keep it for me?"

He accepted the container, and she went to take out her boat. He noticed that on this day she rowed with great deliberation, and she did not wave to him as she rounded the bend.

Travers put the poison in his safe, but several times during the morning he got it out to look at it. Finally, when he could contain himself no longer, he telephoned Doc Morris.

"Heard you called on Gloria Thornton this morning," he said.

"The name is Gloria Grey," Doc snapped. "What old woman have you been gossiping with?"

"Was she very sick?"

"She wasn't sick at all—which is, of course, none of your business."

"Well—I don't suppose you thought to give her a blood test."

"As a matter of fact, I did. Why?"

"Anything wrong with her blood?"

"It's as healthy as blood can be."

"I mean, could she be suffering from anemia, or anything like that?"

"She could not. Why do you ask?"

Travers hesitated. Then he spoke slowly. "I wouldn't be asking, you know, if I didn't think it was important."

The doctor was silent for a moment. "No," he said finally. "I don't suppose you would. If you must know, Gloria Grey is suffering from a slight case of pregnancy. I gave her a blood test, and her husband, too, to check for Rh factor. Pregnancy is not an illness. I've always considered it a healthy and proper condition for a young married woman. Now go back and fuss with your night crawlers, and leave the people to me."

That evening Travers saw Mr.

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and Mrs. Grey leaving the Gross Hardware Store in Riverton. The blond, coolly attractive Gloria surveyed the little town with the confidence of one who could buy the entire place and junk it if she felt so inclined. Grey, burdened with packages, hurried along at her side. He said something to her, and her laughter soared brightly above the street noises.

Travers stopped to watch them. Grey ceremoniously piled his packages on the sidewalk and opened the car door for Gloria. She laughed protestingly, but permitted him to hand her into the car. Then, when he had taken his place behind the wheel, she slid over beside him and they embraced. They drove away slowly, seated close together with her head resting on his shoulder. A sidewalk wag remarked, "I say it's a lousy car that takes two people to drive it."

Travers went in to talk with Ed Gross.

"Good customers of yours?"

Gross shrugged, and fingered his suspenders. "Yes and no. They don't come in here once a month, but when they do she'll buy the store out, if she feels like it. Last January she spent three hundred dollars at one crack on knick-knacks. She goes for novelties—salt shakers that look like TV sets, and stuff like that. Anything she likes, she buys a dozen or two, if I have that many. Sends them to all her friends."

"Grey doesn't object?"

Gross shook his head. "He encourages her. Wanders around looking for things he thinks she'd like."

"Well, it's her money."

"I don't know," Gross said. "He writes the checks. I had it figured that he was well-fixed himself, but it could easily be that it's her money he spends on her. Those two are hard to understand. Have you noticed the way he always calls her Mrs. Grey? 'Mrs. Grey, have you seen this?' he'll say. I've heard newlyweds call each other mister and missus, just because they're so darned glad they *are* mister and missus. But those two have been married for a couple of years, at least. Seems like he's continually trying to convince himself that he's the head of the family. Or maybe it's her he's trying to convince."

"They seem to get along well enough," Travers said.

"That they do. Well, wherever the money comes from, they don't hesitate to use it. He spends plenty on himself, too—mostly for guns and ammunition. He must have quite a gun collection, because he sure buys enough kinds. Just about every kind I have."

"Wild Valley used to be a good place to hunt, in the old days."

"I don't think he hunts," Gross said. "I don't think he does anything but target-shooting, but he must do a lot of that. Whenever he comes in he stocks up on ammo."

"Has he ever bought any rat poison?"

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"Not that I recall. Why do you ask?"

"I heard Wild Valley was infested with rats," Travers said.

"I wouldn't know about that. But if they're using rat poison, they aren't getting it here."

Travers had not told Ronny about Gloria's pregnancy. Somehow that would have seemed like a violation of professional ethics. He almost wished Doc hadn't told him.

When she came for the boat the next morning the girl's face was pinched with worry, but she said nothing, and Travers could not bring himself to ask any questions. It was a trying day for Travers. Ronny did seem to be a bit more cheerful when she returned, and Travers felt better as he watched her head back up the river path.

Then for a few days she was her normal, exuberant self again, and Travers thought he'd heard the last about rat poison. He half forgot about it himself—forgot it enough so that he was jolted when, a week later, she triumphantly presented him with another can.

"Found it in the same place, in the gun room," she said. "And Gloria was sick again this morning."

"But this one hasn't even been opened," Travers said. "Look, Ronny. I talked with the doctor. Gloria doesn't have anything wrong with her blood. It's just that she's going to have a baby."

Ronny stared at him, and clapped her hand to her mouth. "Oh!"

"What's the matter?"

"That's it. That's why he can't wait until he gets rid of me."

"Why would he want to get rid of you?"

"He tried to get Gloria to send me away. I suppose she will, eventually. But now he can't wait. If she has the baby, she'll leave all of her money to the baby."

"Why would she do that?" Travers asked. "She has enough money to make a lot of people rich."

"She just would. And he knows it. So he doesn't want her to have the baby."

Travers tweaked her nose playfully. "You're imagining things. You shouldn't talk like that."

"All right. Yesterday he gave her a present. Now guess what it is."

"I don't know."

"A riding horse!"

"Well, there's nothing very unusual about that," Travers said. "There are stables at Wild Valley, and Jake Thornton used to keep a lot of horses."

"But if she goes riding now—don't you see?"

Travers saw. "Nonsense!" he said, talking to convince himself, rather than Ronny. "Nonsense. He probably ordered the horse before he knew."

Ronny shook her head. "He had plenty of time to cancel the order, then, but he didn't."

She did not take the boat out

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that morning. Instead she sat on the dock, staring out across the river. Travers kept an eye on her, and became increasingly concerned. He had never known her to sit still so long. Finally he went down to her.

She spoke without looking up at him. "There's only one thing for me to do. I'm going to have it out with him."

"I'm sure if you'll only wait—"

"I don't dare wait. You haven't seen his eyes—the way he looks at her. I'll get him to meet me out by the greenhouse tonight and I'll have it out with him."

"Whoa, now!" Travers said. "It wouldn't be safe for a young girl like you meeting a man like that."

"I'm not afraid of him."

"Look—let me have a talk with him. I think I could manage it without getting him riled up, and if it happens that you're wrong—"

"You see? Even you don't believe me. No, this is the only way. I'll talk with him tonight, and then maybe everything will be all right."

She picked up the dog and walked away slowly, with the pony dutifully tagging after her. At the bend in the path she turned and waved. "Goodbye, Old Man."

Travers swore softly, then walked slowly into the station. He thought about calling the sheriff, about calling Gloria, about calling Doc Morris. The whole business seemed so absurd, and yet—what was it about Grey that upset Ronny so? And supposing she were right?

"So she'll meet him at the greenhouse," he said to himself. "Well, I'll be standing by. I'll keep out of it if I can, but if he starts anything I'll break his neck."

At dusk he rowed quietly up the river. Jake Thornton's once-sturdy dock had collapsed long ago—even its concrete pilings were gone. Travers tied his boat to a nearby tree and set off for the greenhouse.

It was quite dark by then, with a feeling of rain in the warm night air. Travers wandered about for a while, using his flashlight cautiously, and finally he located the greenhouse. The mansion seemed to be at least a mile away. Evidently Gloria was giving a party, for he could faintly hear a banging, rowdy kind of music.

Travers seated himself on an overturned bucket at the end of the greenhouse nearest the mansion. There he waited, puffing on his pipe and listening nervously to the sounds that drifted his way.

He straightened up alertly when he heard voices approaching. A man and a woman passed some distance from him, the man arguing, the woman quietly insistent.

"He told me to jump in the river," she said. "So I'm going to go jump in the river."

The puzzled Travers followed them discreetly and waited, listening. He heard a loud splash.

"Come on in," the woman giggled. "The water's fine."

"Idiot!" the man said.

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A few minutes later they headed back toward the house, the man still arguing. Travers returned to his seat by the greenhouse.

"It must be Ronny's bedtime," he grumbled, "though how she could sleep with things like that going on—"

He packed his pipe again, and lit it, carefully concealing the glow of the match. He had a quick look at his watch before he blew the match out.

Ten o'clock.

Another half hour went by. Travers waited doggedly.

Walter Grey came so quietly that Travers did not notice him until he paused a short distance from the greenhouse and lit a cigarette. Once there, he paced back and forth noisily, muttering to himself. He heard Ronny coming before Travers did, and he went to meet her.

"All right," Travers heard him. say. "I'm here. What do you want?"

Travers could not make out Ronny's reply. He got to his feet; and took a few uncertain steps toward them.

"Is that all?" Grey said.

Ronny spoke again.

"Nonsense!"

Suddenly Ronny cried out. Travers lunged forward, but before he had taken two steps the gun went off. He ran quickly, and did not think of his flashlight until he stumbled over the still form on the ground and nearly fell. He knelt down, and put on his flashlight.

It was Grey.

The man was breathing faintly, but his breath was a horrible, rattling froth of blood. Travers ripped away his shirt, exposing the wound in his left chest.

Grey spoke without opening his eyes. "Crazy kid," he muttered. "Should have left her . . . in the nuthouse . . . told Gloria . . ."

"Ronny?" Travers exclaimed. "You mean Ronny was—"

"Crazy . . . mental hospital . . ." Gloria . . ."

Then his eyes opened. He smiled, and spoke quite clearly. "Tell Gloria I love her."

The breathing stopped. Grey's eyes remained open, staring. Travers looked hopelessly in the direction of the house, where music blared incessantly.

Ronny crept back to him, her drooping hand still clutching the revolver. She bent over Grey and looked into his eyes.

"It's all right, now," she announced.

Travers was stricken dumb.

"The death in his eyes," she went on. "It's gone, now."

Her own staring eyes were wide doorways to darkness, and they terrified him. He drew her away gently, though, and his heart went out to her—to Ronny, the radiant, the brave; to the unwanted girl with the pathetic, twisted mind, who for the first time in her adult life had seen love in a man's eyes, and had mistaken it for death.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CLARENCE BUDINGTON KELLAND**
TITLE:	***The Inconspicuous Man***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Alpin Stone
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	A generation ago
COMMENTS:	*He was almost invisible in a crowd, like a white rabbit crouching on the snow. He had not one outstanding feature—he was the commonplace man . . . He was also the most dangerous man in the entire country.*

"HE WAS A STRANGE MAN," SAID Alpin Stone.

"How strange? What had you to do with him?" I asked.

"I had nothing to do with him. I noted him by chance, and when I saw what manner of man he was, I followed him for hours. He did nothing that was not strange."

"Eccentric?" I asked.

"Strange," repeated Alpin with a queer insistence upon that precise word. "First, he was the most ordinary-looking man I ever saw. You might have selected him as a type to represent the whole of a mediocre race. It was because he was so extraordinarily ordinary that he startled me."

"Yes?"

"He was almost invisible in a crowd," said Alpin Stone, "like a white rabbit crouching on the snow. The man had not one outstanding feature, not one noticeable garment, nor movement nor mannerism. He was not an individual."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"Very ordinary things in an ex-

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traordinary way. He was the most indirect man I have ever seen."

"Indirect?"

"Secretive. He covered his most ordinary impulse with a protective coloring. I saw him look at his watch. No man ever looked at his watch in such a manner before. It was as if he wished to conceal from himself the fact that he looked at his watch. He began by taking his handkerchief from his hip pocket, but he did not use it. He glanced at it as if in doubt and replaced it. Then he felt both trouser pockets in turn, like a man looking for some misplaced article. He took out a handful of change and then his jackknife—peered at them, and replaced them. Then he pretended to search his coat.

"In the end, as though by accident, his watch came out in his fingers, face downward. He did not turn it over until it was dropping again into his pocket, and then—a mere downward flicker of his eye—he glanced at the dial. One would never have known he had informed himself of the hour. Every action was like that. Circuitous! An elaboration of concealment. A constant drawing of a herring across the trail."

"The man was insane," I said.

"Not insane," Alpin Stone insisted.

"What then?"

"Potential."

"Of what?"

"Evil," he said solemnly.

But when I endeavored to question him further I could get nothing out of him except repetitions that the man was strange, that he was mediocrity raised to the *n*th power, and that his extraordinary name was John Smith.

I reflected upon this John Smith after Alpin Stone had taken his departure. He was an absurdity, a paradox. That a man should achieve such mediocrity as to be unique was a fascinating thing on which to speculate.

Why, I asked myself, had this person created such a character for himself, and how had he gone about it? Had he schooled himself until he perfected the commonplace, or had he been endowed by nature in some freakish mood with that superlative inconspicuousness? If the former, what was John Smith's object? If the latter, what end did nature seek?

These were the questions which I was quite able to ask, but wholly unable to answer. That would require the abnormal qualities of penetration with which Alpin Stone was gifted—just as it required those qualities to *perceive* John Smith at all, and to become aware how the man stood alone, a genius or a freak—in either event, unique. I am not one readily to be moved aside from my habitual goings and comings, but I found myself consumed with curiosity to see this strange man.

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My curiosity, however, was destined to remain unappeased, for Alpin Stone entered upon one of those self-centered periods which were characteristic of him, and in which, for weeks at a time, he seemed unaware of the existence of any human being but himself.

Time and again he passed me on the street without recognizing me; and day after day he walked up the steps of his house, when I sat on my own porch, without a word or a nod. It was fully two weeks before he became himself again, and then, without preface or apology, he came to the fence dividing our yards and called to me softly. I arose from the bed of flowers I was weeding and walked to him.

Cautiously he drew a number of newspaper clippings from his pocket and passed them across to me, keeping his eye on his kitchen door apprehensively as he did so. I knew at once that some interesting problem had arisen, for the one thing he sought ever to conceal from Mrs. Stone was a fresh occupation with crime. She had no patience with his avocation, and he feared her tongue.

"Read these," he said, "and I'll drop over after dinner to discuss them."

I carried the clippings into the house. They were five in number, bearing datelines of as many cities and covering a period of some six weeks. Two had to do with escapes from State penal institutions, and three described acquittals by juries of criminals of whose guilt the press seemed to have little doubt.

In each of the five cases the criminal described was a man of standing in his unlawful profession and had been convicted or was being tried for a major crime involving a large sum of money. The three jury cases made one dubious as to the wisdom of our utter confidence in the integrity of twelve good men and true. They were evident miscarriages of justice. The verdicts seemed to have astounded Judge and spectators alike. I will quote the remarks of the court in the Denver case, though the arraignment of the jury by the courts of Buffalo and Cincinnati was couched in similar terms.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the Judge, "your verdict has astounded me. You have impressed me as intelligent men. For three days you have occupied your seats and listened attentively to such evidence as could leave no shadow of doubt in the mind of any reasoning being as to the guilt of this defendant. By bringing in a verdict of 'Not guilty,' you have cast discredit on our system of trial by jury. You have stultified your own intelligence, if not your characters for honesty.

"Only two suppositions are open to me: that twelve men have suddenly and collectively lost the power to reason, or that a jury in this court has been reached and tam-

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pered with by some subtle, sinister influence. As to your verdict, my hands are tied and this guilty man must be set at liberty. You I discharge from this panel, and in discharging you I brand you with incompetence, or worse, and order a full investigation of this disgraceful affair."

The newspaperman who reported the trial evidently interviewed other members of the panel, but with little result.

"William Frome, a member of the panel," said the reporter, "admitted that he had been approached by an individual unknown to him on the day preceding the drawing of the jury, who stated his belief in the innocence of the prisoner and that he was being 'jobbed' by the police. Frome states that he declined to discuss the case with the stranger. Jason Whittier admits a similar experience. Being asked to describe the stranger, the jurymen became confused, contradicted each other at essential points, and seemed altogether unable to be of assistance in identifying the individual to whose influence may be due this regrettable fiasco."

The two clippings describing escapes from prison might have been written of the same affair. They told of the disappearance of a prisoner newly confined. In each case the prisoner simply ceased to be present. He disappeared, without violence, without raising an alarm. How he had gained his freedom, at what hour, whether over the walls or through the doors, none could hazard a guess. The authorities were completely mystified, and, though every means of recapture had been resorted to, the convicts were still at large.

I could make nothing of the five clippings, and awaited Alpin Stone's arrival. He came shortly after seven o'clock.

"Well, Jenkins?" he said abruptly.

"A rather queer series of events," I ventured.

"Decidedly," he said. "What do you conclude from them?"

"Nothing," I replied.

"They are strangely similar," he said.

"Coincidence," I suggested.

"There is no coincidence in matters requiring the working of a high intelligence," he said. "The pair of escapes are identical. The jury cases bear the same marks of handicraft. All *five* have one thing in common."

"And that?"

"The prominence of the criminal concerned."

"Admitted," I said.

"In the jury cases we have the following list of common factors." And taking a pencil, he wrote:

1. Prominence of criminal.
2. Large sum of money involved.
3. Clear proof of guilt.
4. Unanimous jury verdict of innocence.
5. Evidence by members of the

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panel, not on the jury, that they were approached obliquely by some stranger.

"The first four items," said Alpin Stone, "are strongly indicative; the last, to my mind, is proof positive."

"Of what?"

"That the three acquittals were managed by the same agency."

"I'm afraid I cannot agree with you," I said.

Alpin shrugged. "We'll wait for further evidence," he said. "If the next batch of clippings coming to me contains other cases with these features, then we may be sure."

"Of what?" I asked.

"That there is some agency working throughout the country—in as widely scattered cities as Denver, Cincinnati, and Buffalo—which is exerting itself to bringing about such miscarriages of justice as these, or, failing that, to aid in the escape of the prisoner after conviction."

"An organization?"

"An organization or a man. Not in the sense you mean, I fancy, of a band of criminals working together like a legitimate corporation, with directors and a president. Such a thing might exist, but I doubt its possibility. Two or three or half a dozen might combine for some definite object, but not a large number for the general practice of crime. No. Criminals are too individual. You might as well expect a trust of opera singers."

"What then?" I asked.

"You're skeptical. We'll let the thing rest until I am in a position to convince you. Meantime I saw my commonplace man today."

"He interests me more than your jury cases," I said. "If he has really developed what might be described as protective coloring, what would be its purpose?"

"Concealment," said Alpin.

"From whom? From what?"

"Jenkins, there is one thing only that men hide from—the consequences of evil acts. Nobody was ever called upon to hide himself because of a good action or because of an indifferent action. When you see an individual secreting himself you may make up your mind he either has done or is in the prosecution of a reprehensible deed."

"Then you think your commonplace man is a criminal?"

Alpin shrugged again. "I took the trouble to keep an eye on him today. In fact, I followed him to his place of business."

"Then he has a business."

Alpin shook his head. "He has an office in the National Building—tiny little hole. There is nothing on the door but his name—John Smith—in small black letters. He has no telephone, and the superintendent of the building has no idea what his occupation is. In fact, even the elevator-man seems to have lost sight of the individual altogether."

"For all we know he may be some exceptionally timid scientific man or a wealthy recluse."

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"True," said Alpin, as he gathered up his clippings and took his leave. "In the interests of society at large I hope you are right."

I did not see Alpin Stone again for three days, but on Thursday he mounted my steps with a newspaper in his hand and with an air of satisfaction.

"Now," he said, "we shall have a chance to test my theory."

"What theory?" I asked.

"That there is an agency working in the interests of certain first-class criminals," he said. "Cross-grained Povah has been arrested."

"Charming name," I commented.

"Charming man," said Alpin. "His specialty is posing as an irascible millionaire. Never bothers with anything smaller than six figures. Probably," he said with the air of a botanist classifying some rare plant, "he ranks first or second among the world's confidence men."

"A distinction," I said.

"It is something to stand first in any profession," said Alpin. "There are in America possibly twenty-five first-class surgeons, not more than that number of first-rate lawyers. I have heard an editor say that there were not more than twenty-five literary men who might be ranked as first-class—and so on. It seems to be a law of nature, and it governs criminals. There are not more than twenty-five men of the first grade in criminal practice—and by first grade in all professions I mean men whose earnings reach a certain point, and who show the possession of true genius."

I could not agree with his attitude of admiration toward a criminal, and his comparison of such a being to an eminent surgeon or man of letters; but it is useless to argue with Alpin on such points, and I let the point go by unchallenged.

"If, as I suspect, there is some interest working to keep our most eminent criminals at large," said Alpin, "we shall see it functioning when Cross-grained Povah comes to trial."

"And that will be?"

"Within ten days, the Prosecuting Attorney informs me. I am running down to police headquarters tonight," he said abruptly. "Want to go along?"

"Of course," I said.

After dinner we strolled down to the red-brick building which houses the officials of our police department, as well as the central station in which important prisoners are confined before being transferred to the county jail. In the corridor we encountered our old acquaintance Detective-Sergeant Samuels, who shook hands and offered us dubious cigars.

"Chief in?" asked Alpin.

"No. I'm in charge tonight—Ed Roush and I."

"Um. I'm interested in this man Povah. Wonder if I could look over

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the effects found on his person when he was arrested?"

"Guess I could stretch a point and give you a look," said Samuels. "Nothin' interestin', though. Didn't even carry a gat. Step into the office."

He stepped to a large cabinet and produced a brown package tied up with white cord. "Here you are," he said, "look 'em over."

Alpin opened the package and spread its contents on the desk. The inventory was brief: pocket-handkerchief, jackknife, fountain pen, pearl scarf pin, seventy dollars in bills and change, a gold watch and chain.

Alpin examined each of these articles, opening the fountain pen to determine if it contained ink, or, if by chance, something was hidden within. He opened the watchcase and studied its interior, shaking his head with disappointment.

He was about to lay it down when his eyes were arrested by a tiny charm in the form of a key. It was not an ornamental key such as young fraternity men affect, but the replica of an ordinary key—a key of the kind which one associates with ungainly locks.

"H'm. Ever see one of these before, Samuels?" he asked.

"Don't remember it."

"Key. H'm. Symbolical, Samuels, eh? Number on it, too, see." He held it closer to the light. "Twenty-four it is. Well, well!" He sat down and whistled monotonously. Then he got up suddenly. "Telegraph blanks, Samuels, please."

The detective procured them, and Alpin wrote five identical messages. "Will you sign these, Samuels? Make it more official. The police departments to which they are addressed will reply at once with the information. Rush 'em, Samuels, and we'll sit and smoke with you till the replies come in."

Within two hours five replies arrived. Alpin read them one by one as they came, and his shock of red hair reared itself higher and higher as his excitement increased.

"I knew it. I knew it," he said over and over again. "These two wires are from the State penitentiaries from which those escapes were made. The wardens find among the escaped convict's possessions small keys, one numbered Eight and one Seventeen. The effects of the three men acquitted by suborned juries were taken away with them, of course, but in two cases the property custodian remembers distinctly the possession of small keys. Now, Jenkins, what do you think?"

"Belong to the same lodge?" asked Samuels.

"Call it a benefit society," said Alpin with a smile. "Much obliged, Sergeant. Good night."

"And now?" I asked as we walked down the steps.

"Now to await the developments of the trial of Cross-grained Povah."

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On the morning of the trial Alpin Stone and I were present in inconspicuous seats among the spectators. Before the drawing of the jury commenced, the Recorder fixed his eye sternly on the attorney for the defendant and, rising from his chair, he leaned forward and said:

"Gentlemen, evidence has been placed in my hands of a systematic effort to tamper with the panel from which this jury is to be drawn. I therefore declare this panel discharged and direct the officers of this court forthwith to fetch in sufficient talesmen with which to proceed. The entire panel here present will be held in the adjoining courtroom pending a thorough investigation."

I glanced about over the faces of the discredited jurymen. They were not of high order, but were rather of that type of hangers-on about our criminal courts who draw sustenance for small political services. They seemed, for the most part, to be men to whom the juryman's fee would be decidedly welcome.

A number of deputies stepped among them and herded them out of the door, and Alpin directed me to follow. We entered the small office opening off the vacant courtroom, where we found a member of the Prosecutor's staff with a stenographer.

Alpin nodded and introduced me. Presently the first talesman to be subjected to examination was ushered in. He was an oldish man, rather out at elbows, with shifty eyes.

"Well, Morton, what about this?" said the young Prosecutor.

"Don't know nothin' about it," said the man.

"Morton, if you want to save your own hide you'll talk. It doesn't matter to me. I'd as soon commit you to wait until the Grand Jury has a chance at you. Suit yourself."

"I hain't took no money. My hands is clean," said Morton.

"But you had a chance to take money."

"Didn't neither—not money—"

"Not money, eh? Then what?"

Suddenly the fellow weakened. "It was my boy Jim. They told me if I didn't do like I was told, they'd turn Jim over to the police."

"So? Who told you this?"

"Feller I never see before."

"What was his name?"

"He didn't tell no name."

"Describe him."

The man hesitated. "He had on a suit with checks and a yaller tie," he said. And there the description ended—with a checked suit and a yellow tie!

A second juror and a third and a fourth were brought into the room. Two of them had nothing to disclose; a third admitted after pressure that he had been approached by a man "with a tail-coat and braid all around the edges and funny kind of glasses on."

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So it went. The only descriptions of the individual or individuals who had sought to tamper with the panel had to do with striking clothes, with extraordinary cravats, or with some conspicuous external easy to lay aside.

Alpin and I spent the entire day at the investigation—fruitlessly, it seemed to me, when it was over.

"The man is a genius," said Alpin.

"Man! A dozen or more men were indicated."

"One man, working alone. Such a genius as we have to deal with would never have associates. There are only two methods known to the police of getting their hands on a first-class criminal. The first is through his pals; the second is by taking advantage of some blunder. They all blunder sooner or later. But this man—I do not look for the kind of blunder the police could use."

"Why do you say there is only one?"

"It is apparent on the face of the matter. He has deliberately created the appearance of a number of different men, and at the same time has guarded against a possible identification of himself. All so simple! He knows the human mind. In one case he wears a cravat of such outrageous color that it becomes dominant. In the second case it was an absurd coat with braid about the edges, and so on. I have seen many attempts at disguise, but never one so effective as this."

On the following Tuesday as I was sprinkling my flower beds before breakfast, Alpin Stone leaned over the fence and said with a twinkle in his eye, "Interested in neckwear, Jenkins?"

"Not especially," I replied.

"I understand," he said, "there is an exhibition of rather unusual neck-ties and haberdashery at a little shop downtown. Might pay you to drop in with me this morning."

"Very well," I said.

"I am responsible for some of the designs myself," he said with the air of an artist who has completed a masterpiece.

The little shop he spoke of was on our main business street, conspicuously located on a corner. As we approached he nodded at the window. "My own idea," he said.

It was a window well calculated to arrest attention. By some trick of lighting it seemed filled with luminous blackness, while in the center, as if floating in air and defying gravitation, was a single cravat. But such a cravat! It would mark its owner. It would single him out in a crowd. It was a tie to dominate even a mass meeting!

"Heavens!" I said, "who perpetrated that offense?"

"None other," said Alpin, "than myself."

We passed into the shop. Its walls were arranged like some art gal-

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lery, and in the lighted frames were cravats and coats and hosiery. It was an exhibition, but an exhibition to give a man who was timid about his externals the sort of nightmare which awakes one in a cold sweat.

"Wait till the papers get hold of this," said Alpin with a chuckle. "Then you'll see things."

"But why? What is the idea?"

"Wait and see. I've a place where we can sit and observe without being seen. Somehow I fancy we shall see something worth waiting for."

All that day we occupied a cubicle behind a partition, scrutinizing shoppers through a small orifice. It was entertaining but useless so far as I was able to judge. That evening's papers fell upon the exhibition with biting humor. The natural result was that the shop was crowded next morning.

Alpin and I occupied our cubicle patiently. It was toward noon when his fingers tightened suddenly on my arm.

"Look!" he said. "Look! There. Next to the young man with the horn-rim glasses."

I looked. Had my attention not been so pointedly called to the individual I should never have seen him. It was not that he was invisible, but he was, if I may use such a barbarous word, unnoticeable. He was there, but he did not form a part of the picture. One had to concentrate to keep one's attention upon him. He might have stood near you in a crowd for hours without your becoming aware of his presence. And as for describing him, that was out of the question. For this individual possessed no outstanding features. He was the ultimate in suppression!

"Your commonplace man!" I exclaimed.

"Exactly," said Alpin. "Exactly. I might have known. The thing was obvious. Watch."

Then began a curious performance in indirection. The man strolled about, and I give you my word there were times when I almost lost sight of him entirely. He asked to be shown some black lisle hosiery. This he examined meticulously, edging along the counter as he did so and compelling the clerk to follow him. He allowed his attention to wander from the hosiery to plain white handkerchiefs and then to plain white shirts. Finally, while holding a shirt in one hand, he reached out suddenly, without looking up, and snatched a grotesque tie from a hanger and put it into the bosom of the shirt.

"Take these," he said in a toneless voice.

"Did you see that?" Alpin said joyously. "Now do you wonder those jurymen found nothing to describe but ties! Why, put a red tie on that man and he is completely disguised; change it to yellow and he is still another person. It is perfection, genius. He has no iden-

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tity outside the clothes he chooses to wear."

"All of which," I pointed out, "may be convincing to us, but not proof for a jury."

"A dangerous man!" said Alpin. "The most dangerous to society!"

"And now what?" I asked.

Alpin shook his head. "I think I shall have to take the bull by the horns. See you this evening, Jenkins."

To the remainder of the adventure I was not an eyewitness, but such was Alpin Stone's gift of narrative that it is difficult for me to believe I did not see what he described to me afterward . . .

Alpin left me to proceed to the building in which John Smith, the commonplace man, seemed to have his headquarters. He ascended to Smith's office, and, listening outside the door, heard faint sounds within. Very softly he turned the knob and quickly stepped inside the room.

John Smith sat at a desk close to the left-hand wall, his face to the room, his back nearly touching the closed door of the adjoining office. On the desk were a number of books which, Alpin told me, were for the most part upon sociological subjects, with one or two volumes which might have been found on the desk of the actuary for some great insurance company.

A thing which puzzled and interested Alpin was the fact that the desk was immovable—was screwed to the floor by means of iron straps at each leg. The man held in his hand a small book, like a diary, bound in red morocco leather. Save for the desk, the chair Smith occupied, and another chair facing it, the room was bare.

Smith's expressionless eyes were fixed on Alpin, with no sign either of alarm or annoyance, and he waited for my friend to speak. Doubtless he held the thought that Alpin had entered the office by mistake.

Alpin walked across the room and, taking a small object from his vest pocket, dropped it on the desk before the commonplace man.

It was a key—the exact duplicate of the one found among the possessions of Cross-grained Povah.

Smith picked up the key and regarded it curiously, then shook his head.

"What is this?" he asked in a toneless voice.

"I come from *him*," said Alpin. "You see the number on the key—Eleven."

"From whom?"

"He was arrested under the name of Judkins—in Baltimore. Gave me the key and told me to come and give it to you."

"Baltimore. I know of no man named Judkins in Baltimore. Most especially no man liable to arrest."

"That's all one to me. I was told to give the key to you. There it is." Alpin turned as if to leave, but the commonplace man stopped him.

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"Wait," he said, and, rising, walked to the door, locked it, and placed the key in his pocket. "You and I have matters to talk over," he said. "Sit down."

Alpin obeyed, and the commonplace man seated himself again behind his desk.

"You will be so good," he said, "as to sit perfectly motionless and to make no sound which may be heard outside."

As he gave these directions Alpin was aware that an automatic revolver equipped with a silencer was directed against his stomach between two books on the desk top.

"I wondered who you were," said the commonplace man. "You are not, I take it, connected with the police?"

Alpin shook his head.

"You see," said the commonplace man, "the owner of key Number Eleven is not in Baltimore. He is in this city. I saw him not three hours ago."

"Ah!" said Alpin. "Luck played against me."

"I suppose I have you to thank for the Povah surprise—the discharge of the panel?"

Alpin nodded.

"But how," said the man, "did you happen on *me?*"

"It was apparent someone must be operating this new species of insurance. I looked for you."

"Ah! Insurance? So at last we have a mind which can coordinate widely separated facts and reason from effect to cause."

"Denver, Buffalo, Cincinnati, here—to say nothing of the pair of jail escapes. By the way, why not a general line of criminal insurance—a lump sum or monthly installments to care for their families while the criminals are in prison? Or do you include that?"

"I'm beginning to admire you. You *have* reasoning faculties. You would be interested to see my classified tables, but I'm afraid I shall have to disappoint you. But they are sound and scientific. In your life insurance, death is always certain to come, sooner or later. In criminal insurance, arrest is not inevitable. Indeed, a fair portion of criminals never feel the hand of the police. I know the precise percentage. I have compiled statistics showing the total number of so-called criminals in America, and the growth of that number from year to year. I have subdivided these into their specialties. You see, I am speaking frankly. You are a man who deserves to have his curiosity satisfied—even if you cannot be allowed to use the information."

"You have regular schedules of premiums—as in life or fire insurance?"

"Exactly. I can tell you the scientific percentage of the chances of arrest of any individual criminal in the country during a given year. Of course I do not insure every Tom, Dick, and Harry."

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"And in return for the premiums?"

"In the case of the average run, a lump sum to the wife on the first of every year of imprisonment."

"But in the case of the first twenty-five? It *is* twenty-five, isn't it?"

"Twenty-seven, to be exact. That is a different branch. You might call that my Liberty Guaranty Department. Oh, yes. For a sum commensurate with the value of the guaranty, I assure my clients of being set free in case of arrest. I have been very successful."

"I'm glad to have my surmises confirmed," said Alpin.

"And I," said the commonplace man, "while I admire your ability, dislike to have my affairs impeded. Why, in time, if you were allowed, you might interfere seriously with me. It is not so much that you have discovered that the same hand arranged the Denver, Cincinnati, and Buffalo affairs, it is that you have found *me*. I have taken some pains to remain invisible."

"You have defied a natural law," said Alpin. "It is the will of God or Nature, or whatever you choose to call the ruling power, that there shall be individuals—that every created thing shall be itself, distinct, recognizable. There was purpose in this law. It was, I believe, that all individuals should be unlike all others in order that each might be clearly identified and held to account for his own conduct. You have violated this law, erased your personality, made yourself into a composite of the commonplace. It is never safe to violate a natural law."

"Yet it is not I who am in danger at this moment. Of course you realize I cannot let you go away, free to make public the information you have—very cleverly—got together. I am sorry, for I really admire you."

He smiled. "But I must go on about my business uninterrupted, while you—well, you shall be rendered unable to annoy me."

Alpin Stone was thinking, not of the danger of the situation, but how strange it was that all men craved admiration—criminals as well as poets. Here was John Smith, deprived of human companionship by his vocation, availing himself of an opportunity to boast. Vanity was his weakness. Alpin did not smile. He hoped.

"Let us review," said John Smith. "Grant that you know I am the individual who tampered with your jury and who has tampered with other juries. If I were brought face to face with any one of the jurymen, not one could identify me. There is not a soul in the world, even the bearers of those little keys, who can identify me. You, I believe, are the one man who can do so. And you would have difficulty in presenting proofs. You are an able man, but you did not come here to place me under arrest. No, my friend, you came

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hunting for evidence against me."

"True," said Alpin.

"And you came alone."

"Alone," said Alpin.

"That was unwise." John Smith motioned with the revolver he held in his hand. "It is faulty criminal practice to kill, and I do not want to kill you. Indeed, I shall not kill you. But I must assure myself of your future inability to identify me. That is an ordinary precaution which you must expect me to take."

"I should do so in your place," said Alpin.

"I have provided against this emergency. One must have forethought." John Smith opened a drawer and produced a small atomizer.

"For the eyes?" said Alpin.

"Exactly. Blind, you would be unable to identify me, and I would not have the consequences of a killing to worry about."

Alpin nodded.

"So," said John Smith, "your curiosity costs you your eyesight."

"Better blind and alive than dead and out of the play altogether," said Alpin. "It was a rather forlorn hope, my coming to see you. I really had little expectation of success, but I felt I must try. Even if I went away at this moment, there is no crime of which my evidence could convict you. I had another thing in my mind."

"Which was?"

"To step outside the law," said Alpin.

"Take justice into your own hands?"

"Not in the sense you mean," said Alpin.

"I'm curious—frankly."

Alpin shrugged.

"Well," said John Smith, "we may as well have the thing over with." He arose, revolver in one hand, atomizer in the other, and came around the desk. "It is comparatively painless," he said. "A stinging sensation for an hour or two—nothing more."

He came closer, presenting the revolver to Alpin's stomach with his left hand, while he held the atomizer ready in his right. "You were an able man," he said with something like regret in his voice, "and really able men like you and myself are very rare."

For an instant he stood staring into Alpin's eyes, and Alpin stared up into his. The human will is a strange engine. No human being has fathomed its possibilities. For an instant Alpin held John Smith's eyes, bent the powers of his will to the task of gripping the man's attention, of making him think for the merest fraction of a second of Alpin Stone's fixed gaze, and not of his trigger-finger.

Alpin watched to see that momentary setting of expression which denoted his instant had come—for that fixing of the eyes indicating the slightest eye-strain.

It came.

In that fraction of a second Al-

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pin Stone moved—his hands moved, powerful hands and wrists. Sure, obedient to his will, his fingers closed on the wrists of John Smith and thrust the man's hands downward.

Alpin Stone was a powerful man. He was able to hold John Smith immovable, and as he clutched those wrists he increased the power of his grip, burying the tips of his fingers and nails in the man's flesh.

John Smith panted, strained, uttered a stifled exclamation as the revolver dropped from one paralyzed hand and the atomizer from the other.

Then Alpine tripped him and laid him on the floor on his face, forcing his hands behind him, and there he held both wrists with a single hand until he could draw a stout cord from his pocket to bind them. Next he directed his attention to the feet, and, presently, inserted a gag in John Smith's mouth. The man was helpless.

"All extra-legal, as you will observe," said Alpin, and, turning his back, drew a candle from his pocket, which he set upright on the desk. Then he set beside it a curious implement like the little seal with which one impresses his monogram on the wax dropped on the flap of an envelope, but somewhat larger. This implement he held in the flame of a candle until it glowed red.

"John Smith," he said, "you have so made yourself over as to destroy your individuality. As the commonplace man, you are a menace, a constant danger. As I said, this is all outside the law, but I fancy you will make no complaint to the authorities."

He bent over John Smith and pressed the little instrument to his cheek.

A choked cry came from under the gag; the man's body lurched convulsively and relaxed.

Alpin bent close to examine his work. On the right cheek of the commonplace man was seared with a hot iron an ineffaceable brand—a letter S as large as the first joint of a man's finger.

The commonplace man was commonplace no longer. Forever from that moment he would be easily recognized by the least observant eye as the man with the scar.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **NORMAN DANIELS**

TITLE: ***Father Keough's Decision***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An unusual story . . . about a difficult decision Father Keough made during the War, and the more difficult problem it created later in a prison Death House.*

FATHER KEOUGH HAD NEVER BEEN inside a prison before. He looked about him with interest, thinking he could do a great deal here with such fertile material, although the clanging of doors and the sliding of bolts were hardly like the sacred quiet of St. Theresa's where he was pastor.

Father Keough was fifty, a strapping figure of a man on the handball court or in the pulpit. He had clear blue eyes and ready wit, but most of all, he had the compassion which makes a fine priest.

A trusty guided him to the Warden's office and opened the door for him. Father Keough walked in and extended his hand to the Warden standing behind his desk.

"You were prompt," the Warden said. "Sit down, please."

Father Keough accepted the black leather chair beside the desk. "I came as quickly as I could, Warden. Partly out of great curiosity. I've searched my memory, but no matter how hard I think, I can't recall anyone I know who is a prisoner here. You say the man's name is Hollis?"

"That's right. Philip Hollis. Before you see him, I thought we'd better discuss the matter. Hollis has been here since his trial some months ago and he has refused all offers of religious comfort."

"Perhaps," the priest said, "he is now ready . . ."

"Not this man. That's what worries me. I think he is going to try to use you in some manner."

"Use me? But how in the world can he? What's he done, Warden?"

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"He's a married man, Father. He consorted with another woman and when she went broke because of his squandering habits, he deliberately strangled her to death."

"Oh . . . I see."

"He's going to be electrocuted in three days—otherwise I would never have granted his request to see you. He's a particularly vicious, evil man. We've had him here before. Once he almost killed a guard and it's believed he committed murder prior to the crime for which he's going to die soon."

"Philip Hollis . . . For the life of me I can't recall—"

"There's some connection between you and him, Father—something, I'm sure, that he intends to profit from. He's desperate and scared. If he has anything on you, or on any friend of yours, he'll try to use blackmail. I should warn you, Father, he's an expert at blackmail."

"I'd better see him, Warden."

"Well, you've been warned. I don't know what he wants, but I'm certain it's not religious solace."

"We shall see," the priest said.

The Warden picked up his phone. "Send in Brady to escort Father Keough to the Death House. And get Hollis."

A sergeant of guards walked with the priest and they ended up before the double doors of the maximum-security cells where the condemned were held. To Father Keough it all had an unreal air about it. While waiting between the two gates, he began to wonder what a complete stranger could want of him in here, if not the comfort of religion.

He was taken to a small room, windowless, barren of furniture except for two wooden chairs and a small table. He sat down.

Then the man came in. Father Keough studied him intently. He saw a tall, almost ungainly man with unkempt hair and a sullen mouth under a long, sharp nose. His eyes were deep-set and glittering-black. Father Keough, whose calling demanded that he like all man, had an uneasy thought that here was one he would not want to call friend under any circumstances.

Hollis stood on the other side of the table. "You don't remember me, do you?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not," Father Keough said.

"Not even my name?"

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Well, you'll remember. I know all about you. I've followed your career. In a few weeks you're due to be elevated to the rank of Monsignor. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"You know what I'm in here for?"

"The Warden told me."

"Once before you showed up as time was running out for me. You seem to have a knack for being around when I'm dying. Think

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now—the farmhouse outside of St. Lo. In 1943—you were passing by in a jeep—"

"The soldier," Father said sharply. "You must be the one I gave the blood to!"

"That's right," Hollis said. "You heard me yell. You came in. There were two of us—me and this other doughfoot. We were both wounded, almost dead. Remember now? You had two mortally wounded men, both in need of blood, but you had only a single pint of it. Enough for only one—and you had to choose. It was your choice, Father, which of us would live. Remember now?" His voice grew shrill and eager. "Yes, I see you do. You went down on your knees and prayed. I was conscious. You didn't know that, did you? You prayed for guidance. Then you gave me the blood."

"And the other man died," Father Keough said slowly. "I never knew your name nor what you looked like, really. It was dark and I had no time to study faces."

"Okay, so that's how it was."

"I'm truly sorry to find you in this terrible trouble," the priest said. "How can I help?"

Hollis sat down, smiling in satisfaction. "Ah, now you're talking. I want you to go to the Governor and tell him you saved my neck in the war and that you want me saved again. Tell him you know I'll justify a commutation of sentence. Tell him anything you like just so they don't burn me next Thursday. I don't want to die that way, Father. Save me from that."

"My son, you know I can't do that."

Hollis' smile died. "You can't—or you won't?"

"It is not in my province."

"Well, damn you and your province," Hollis shouted. "Now listen to me and get it straight. You saved my life. Okay—but what did you save? A guy who killed a woman and who's going to die himself because of it. You saved *nothing*. What you did was let another man die—a very nice guy with a nice family. He'd never have gotten into the kind of a mess I'm in. He'd have been maybe a big shot in his community. Me—I'm no good. I'm a murderer. You didn't save me—you killed the people I killed. Yeah, there was more than one. The cops don't know that, but it's true."

"I cannot help you in the way you ask," the priest said quietly.

"Yes, you can—and you will if you know what's good for you."

"No, Mr. Hollis."

"Well, listen to me before you make up your mind. I'm holding a hefty club over your head. Know what I'll do? I'll call a press conference. Or if that's refused me, I'll yell it out until everybody hears me. I'll tell about the priest who prayed for guidance so he'd save the right man and he saved the wrong one, and I mean the wrong

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one. I'll make it look like you shouldn't even be a priest, let alone get yourself pushed up to Monsignor."

Father Keough rose abruptly, trying to hold his anger in check. "I hope it will not be too difficult for you, my son."

Hollis was too confident to show panic. "So you're not going to do anything?"

"I cannot."

"I can wreck your career—you know that."

Father Keough's face bore an age-old sadness. "You lived, Philip. No matter what happened afterward, you lived and that was meant to be."

"You know, Father, I believe in prayer too. I believe prayers are answered—but I also think it takes a good man to recognize the answers. I don't think you did a very good job in the interpretation department."

Father Keough's eyes had gone dull and there was an aching drive inside his head. His first inclination was to run out of there, away from this almost-dead man who had spent his last hours scheming with a cunning to rival that of the devil himself. Yet, what he said made some sense. A priest, a monsignor even more so, should be able to know when prayers were answered and how to react when the answer came. In the case of Philip Hollis he couldn't have been more wrong.

"Hits kind of hard, doesn't it, Father?"

"Yes—it isn't easy to face up to a threat like yours."

Hollis rubbed his neck again. He could feel the beginnings of the twitching and he wasn't going to show nerves to anybody—not to anybody at all.

"You understand," he said, "I'm grateful for the years you gave me. I'm glad you made a mistake, but keep in mind the fact that I'm a desperate man. My life's riding on you and if I have to make it tough, I'll make it tough."

"In other words," the priest said, "if I don't help you, this whole story is going to come out."

"In detail, Father—every tiny detail. Either way you turn, you're faced with it. If your prayers weren't answered, you're not a very good priest. If they were, you misinterpreted them and therefore you're not a very good priest. Most certainly, you're not Monsignor material."

Father Keough felt easier now that the entire problem was out in the open. He was singularly unafraid of what this man could do. Fear didn't affect Father Keough—but doubts did. They were growing rapidly within him and they were far worse than fear.

"My son," he said, "I will help you as I'd help any man in need of me. But whatever I do, it will not be the result of your threats."

"Just see the Governor, Father.

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Don't delay. The crisis in my illness comes soon. I warn you—don't fail me!"

Father Keough walked around the table and placed a hand on Hollis' shoulder. "I know how you must feel. You're down to your last faint hope. Goodbye, Philip."

Hollis looked up at him with a studied tolerance. "You'll be back, Father."

"If you send for me, Philip, and for the proper reason."

Father Keough knocked hard on the locked door to attract the guard. He didn't look back. Once out of the prison, he drove directly to the residence of the Bishop. It was necessary that he relate the whole story before Philip Hollis told it publicly. Besides, there was the matter of his request for a transfer, which only the Bishop could grant.

Their years of cooperation and the work they'd done together had made them strong friends. Father Keough now had real need of one. He sat across from this man of sixty-seven years, who looked fifty. The pinkness of the Bishop's cheeks and the alertness of his eyes did much to make his years light. He bowed to age only in his hair which had once been jet-black and wild, but was now thin and white.

The Bishop listened with great interest. Many different problems had come to him during his lifetime, but none quite like this. Even before Father Keough finished, the Bishop knew there would be no ready answer.

"That night in St. Lo," Father Keough said, "I was lost. I found an abandoned Red Cross jeep and went looking for the wounded and the dying. I had just one pint of blood in the jeep. That was all—one pint. I found this man, Philip Hollis, and another soldier in a farmhouse with only two walls and no roof. They were both horribly wounded, both in need of immediate help. One pint of blood for two men, Excellency. If I divided it, the blood would have been of help to neither. It had to go to one man."

"And so you prayed for guidance," the Bishop said.

"I prayed and I gave the blood to this man who is a murderer and himself now condemned. Was that the answer to my prayer, Excellency?"

"How can you be sure it was not, my son?"

"To sacrifice a life that may have been worthwhile—and save this—this creature!" He was instantly contrite. "I'm sorry. For a moment I forgot."

"If you felt that you were properly guided, then your decision was right."

"But I'm not sure. There was so little time then—the front was a bedlam, shells were falling everywhere. I checked Hollis' dog tag; the blood was of his type, he was

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obviously dying, there were only moments in which to act—so I gave him the blood. My only hope was that I could then get both men away in time to save their lives. Even after administering the blood, Hollis was in desperate need of hospital care so I carried him immediately to the jeep.

"Then I started back for the second man. The Germans must have had the farmhouse pinpointed, for they dropped two mortar shells on it. When I managed to reach the second man, part of the wall had fallen on him and he was dead. I couldn't even move him to get at his dog tags. Later, I sent a detail back for his body. It was then that I learned his name and address, but it was so long before I returned home that I thought it would be cruel to reopen the sorrow of his widow. Now, of course, I must go to her, for I might have saved him instead of Hollis, and she must be told—and by me."

"But first you will see the Governor?" the Bishop asked softly.

"No, Excellency."

"You do not expect me . . . ?"

Father Keough cut in quickly. "I would refuse your offer if you made one. I didn't come here to plead for this man. I wanted you to know the story first, so you would understand why I'm asking to be transferred—"

The Bishop shook his head. "You're coming here to work with me." His voice lost its gentle authority and became warm with the breath of friendship. "Michael, this is not of your doing. You are permitting a man without hope to destroy you. What can you gain by withdrawing from life? You're needed here, Michael. Use the good sense granted to you."

Father Keough sighed. "It comes down to the level of one question, Excellency. I am a priest. I believe in God and in prayer, and I believe prayers are answered. But as a priest I must stand in judgment of my own ability to interpret the answers. Could it have been God's will that this murderer be saved and a good man left to die?"

"Perhaps, Michael."

"No," Father Keough said. "With all due respect to your fine judgment, you are only trying to quiet my fears."

"The investiture is still weeks away, Michael. There is time for you to find the answer."

"I know the answer," Father Keough said. "I've but one thing left undone. I must go to this woman whom I widowed—the wife of the man I let die so that Philip Hollis would live."

Wisely the Bishop agreed this must be done. Somewhere, he firmly believed, Father Keough would find the answer.

Father Keough found the address easily. It was a small ranch-type house in one of those postwar suburban areas which had mush-

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roomed so suddenly and yet, years later, looked pleasant and lovely.

There was a neat sign hanging below an old-fashioned lamp-post at the driveway. It read: *A. Breckner*. Father Keough parked his car and walked to the porch. He no longer feared what he had to do. It was now as necessary as his withdrawal from St. Theresa's and his request that he be removed from the candidacy of Monsignor.

He had pressed the bell only once when he heard the car pull into the driveway. A woman got out quickly and hurried toward him. She was an attractive woman, in a brown cloth coat and no hat. She had a level glance, an air of efficiency about her.

"You must be in the wrong place, Father," she said. "Maybe I can help you."

"You are Mrs. Breckner?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes."

"I'm Father Keough. My visit is long overdue. I was with your husband when he died."

She said, "Oh!" in a voice he barely heard and she took a key from her pocket and unlocked the door. She held it for him and he entered directly into the small, pleasant living room.

"Sit down," she said. "I'm glad you came. They never told me much of what happened. My children—we had two—they ask me how he died and I can't tell them."

"He was unconscious when I found him," Father Keough said, "but I was there and I thought you should know."

She looked at him, dry-eyed. "Thank you, Father. I know Abe wasn't the hero type. But he was a good soldier. I'm sure he was that. A very good soldier."

"I'm sure of it too. Now I have something to tell you which I must get off my conscience. It isn't pleasant, but you're entitled to know. That night he died there was another man also dying. I had only one pint of blood—just one. The man I gave it to would live, the other would . . ."

She bit her lip, worrying it nervously before she looked at him. "Father, I'm a nurse. I understand the situation. It's one I've thought of myself . . . and shuddered over. Under the circumstances, one does the best—"

"You don't quite understand," he said. "Your husband died. I have no doubt but that he was a fine man and he would have come back to be a finer one. The man I saved—he is to be executed tomorrow night for a vicious and wanton murder."

Shirley Breckner walked across the room to the picture of a man in uniform—a man Father Keough didn't recognize because the only time he'd seen him the man's face had been too bloody and dirt-smeared. Shirley looked at the photo for a long time before she turned around.

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"All right," she said. "How could you know? There were two men and you had to choose. Maybe Abe would have died anyway . . ."

"That is not the point, Mrs. Breckner. It was my mistaken judgment—no, it was more than that. You see, while I examined the other man, I prayed for guidance—and my decision was to sacrifice your husband. Therefore, if my prayers were answered—and I choose to believe they were—then I interrupted the answer wrongly. That makes me a poor priest. A man who believes as I do should find the answer to a prayer simple and easy to comprehend. I did not, and there I must bear the blame.

She sat down on the sofa beside him. "There's no blame attached to it, Father."

"I feel there is," he said. "Furthermore, I'm afraid we'll have to endure some publicity. This man—the one I saved—is threatening me with a form of blackmail. Unless I save him by begging for clemency, he will reveal this whole story."

"Let him," she said, her eyes flashing. "A man like that, without conscience . . ."

"I thought you should know, Mrs. Breckner. Thank you for being so understanding."

"Don't give in to this man, Father—don't give an inch."

He smiled and nodded and went on out. For a long time she sat in deep contemplation, as if there were a way out of this for the worried priest, and she should think of it; but no answer came to her . .

The next morning the Warden telephoned. Father Keough had been expecting the call. He said, "Thank you, Warden. I will see Mr. Hollis today—as soon as I can get there. I realize his apprehension at my delay. Please tell him that I will come to give him what solace he can accept. Be sure to tell him that—what solace he can accept."

He hung up and finished the letter to the Bishop. His request for a transfer would have to be in writing, he knew, and it had been a difficult letter to compose.

When the doorbell rang he paid little attention until it rang again and he recalled that his housekeeper was marketing. He went to answer the door and found a wan-faced woman of about forty waiting for him.

"I'm Mrs. Hollis," she said. "May I come in?"

He hadn't even given a thought to the fact that there might be a Mrs. Hollis. "Come in, please," he said, and led her into the study. He leaned against the edge of his desk after she was seated. She looked up at him with worried eyes.

"Father," she said, "I know what Philip has threatened to do. I tried to talk him out of it, but—well, you can't do much with a man like Philip—not at this time."

"I know," Father Keough said.

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"I don't blame him."

"But you're not going to help him?" she asked.

"I'll pray for him, with him—that is all I can do."

"I knew this crazy idea wouldn't work," she said. "But Phil—he always knows it all. You understand why, Father? He's scared."

"Yes, I understand."

"He's going through with it. If they don't let him see a reporter or allow his letter to a newspaper to go out, he'll shout it out when they take him—where the reporters will be—you know."

"I'm prepared for whatever he does, Mrs. Hollis. I'm only sorry that it worries you."

"I'm going up there soon as I leave here. I'll beg him to keep his mouth shut. I'll tell him it's hard enough keeping the truth from Robbie now and if he ever gets all this publicity—"

"You refer to a son?" Keough asked softly.

"Yes—seven years old."

Father Keough clasped his hands before him, very tightly. Could this be the answer? Was this the reason why he'd saved Philip Hollis? A life saved to create a life? It was possible.

"I'll be driving up there in about an hour if you'd care to wait," he said.

"No," she said. "I'd rather take the bus, as I've always done. I'll try to make him see you. I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you will, Mrs. Hollis."

Then suddenly Shirley Breckner appeared in the doorway. Instinct told him these two women should not meet—but it was too late. Shirley walked slowly into the room, her eyes fixed on Mrs. Hollis.

She spoke to Father Keough without looking at him. "The door was open. I rang, but nobody came, so I walked in. I hope I didn't do wrong." She looked at him then. "This woman—she's the one?"

Father Keough said, "Yes."

Shirley put out both hands toward Mrs. Hollis and then impulsively embraced her when she stood up. They didn't speak. No one did—until Mrs. Hollis left the study and they heard the rectory door close after her.

Shirley sat down. "Father," she asked, "did you know I'm a Jew? That Abe was a Jew?"

"No," he said. "It never occurred to me."

She nodded. "Just like my George said. George, my son—Abe's son. He said if you didn't know Abe was a Jew, then you couldn't have looked at his dog tags. Is that right?"

Numbly, Father Keough nodded, realizing this had some bearing on his problem, but not seeing just how.

"You had this one pint of blood. So you prayed—you wanted to give the blood to the right man. You thought that you did not know the true meaning of the an-

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swer you got. But, Father, you did."

"I don't understand," he said.

"This one pint of blood you had —what type was it?"

"'A' positive," he answered.

"This man Hollis—his type was 'A' positive?"

"Yes."

"You checked Hollis' dog tag to find that out?"

"Yes. Yes, I checked."

"But you couldn't check my Abe's tags, so you couldn't have known his blood type was 'O' negative. The pint of blood you had would have killed him. Don't you see, Father? You saved the only man you could have saved with that blood. It was right—you did the right thing! No matter what he became afterwards—that has no bearing. At the moment of your decision only this man Hollis could have been saved."

Father Keough picked up the letter to the Bishop and slipped it into the desk drawer.

"I think I can reach Mrs. Hollis before she gets on the bus."

"You run along, Father. I'll let myself out."

"Thank you," he said. "I'll do what I can for Hollis' son—you see, he has a son. Everything has a reason, and that son is the reason why Philip lived. I'm not going to let that reason go to waste."

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDBOUNDS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE	
Carmichael, Harry	OF UNSOUND MIND	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	$3.50	10/19/62	0
Carr, John Dickson	THE DEMONIACS	Harper & Row	$3.95	10/24/62	0
Charteris, Leslie	TRUST THE SAINT	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	$3.50	10/5/62	0
Halliday, Brett	NEVER KILL A CLIENT	Dodd, Mead & Co.	$3.50	10/15/62	0
Francis, Dick	DEAD CERT	Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, Inc.	$3.50	9/27/62	0
Hopkins, Kenneth	DEAD AGAINST MY PRINCIPLES	Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, Inc.	$3.50	10/1/62	0
McCutcheon, Hugh	YET SHE MUST DIE	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	$3.50	10/5/62	0
Rooney, Frank	THE GREAT CIRCLE	Harcourt Brace & World, Inc.	$5.75	10/24/62	0
Witting, Clifford	VILLAINOUS SALTPETRE	British Book Centre	$3.50	10/8/62	0

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 240th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . You will find Mr. Pickering's adventure in deduction a journey backward in time—a return, in style and plot, to the "classical" technique of The Golden Age. Professor Themistocles Sorites will remind you of the eccentric amateur detectives so popular in the 30s—indeed, he may not strike you as an entirely lovable character (Philo Vance was not exactly adored), but he is pure nostalgia; and although his creator has somewhat stacked the cards, the mammoth Professor knows his ratiocination.

The author is 24, married, and has one child, a daughter. He attended the University of Southern California and Los Angeles City College, originally majoring in Architecture and later changing to English and Drama. His hope and ambition are to be successful as both a writer and an actor. He knows by personal experience that both careers are "tough rows to hoe," and since leaving school most of his income has come "from driving hack, delivering soft drinks, packing ice cream, parking cars, and selling insurance."

Well, Mr. Pickering, we can only say what we have said to so many—hoe those rows! It's hard work, backbreaking and often discouraging; but whatsoever a man hoeth, that shall he also reap . . .

A LESSON IN LOGIC

by ROBERT PICKERING

THE FANTASTICALLY FAT MAN paused a moment before the classroom door, then opened it and prepared to make an extraordinary announcement. Eleven heads turned in unison toward the door. An entire semester had not dulled the students' appetite for this daily drama—for the defeat of the physical impossibility; and as the man with the astonishing girth surveyed their rapt faces, it was clear to him that any announcement, however extraordinary, must wait until the daily ritual had been performed.

The principals involved in this strange rite (it might have been called a contest if a less imaginative man had been involved) were only two: one door aperture, 30

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inches in width—maximum; one Professor Themistocles Sorites, P.H.D., L.I.L.D.—33 inches in diameter, minimum, and 412 pounds, present weight.

It had long since been proved in this classroom that a larger physical mass could be forced into and through a smaller spatial area—a proof, perhaps, of mind over matter, but nonetheless, a phenomenon which caused great consternation among the University's four physicists. It was, in addition, no mean accomplishment on the part of Professor Sorites, regardless of the fact that he had had removed from the doorjamb a particularly annoying nail which had rendered useless no less than seven pairs of suspenders.

However, at this juncture, the critical question was no longer "Will he make it?" but rather "How Fast?"—and several of the more enterprising students had acquired stop watches, since the Professor's relative speed not only made for good conversation but was an accurate gauge to his disposition. Thus, when he clocked out at two and six-tenths seconds, with only two twists and a single lunge accomplishing the feat, the Senior Seminar in Logic and Scientific Methods knew something unusual was in the offing.

Sorites' curly black-and-gray hair had fallen over his eyes and he was panting noisily from his exertions. As he moved with surprising agility to the head of the table it occurred to him that the air going in and out of him sounded half like a lawnmower and half like a death rattle.

"He took an especially deep breath, then announced almost gleefully, "Today we are going to solve a murder!"

While the students exchanged excited words and glances, Sorites sat down, overflowing his chair like a quart of honey poured into a one-pint container. He forced his precise words up and out through layers of jowl and past a mustache which looked like a plot of crabgrass gone wild.

"Most murders, you understand, are highly illogical. They are crimes of passion or brutality, concluded with neither finesse nor taste. These crude affairs are easily solved by the police and therefore are unsuitable to engage the energies of this class.

"But from time to time there come to the public eye murders of such a baffling nature as to seem insoluble. These crimes are usually shrewdly plotted that our crime detection officers find themselves against a blank wall. No revealing clues are apparent, and because of the public's awareness of their failure, the police are compelled to redouble their efforts, retrace their steps a hundred times, dig up cities, dredge harbors, and in general extend their method to the limits of absurdity. And when they again

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come up empty-handed, they blame their failure on the complexity of the crime and whine about the lack of manpower in the department.

"These are the types of crimes we should consider, for one person with a truly logical mind can cut any of these Gordian knots in less than eight hours."

"I don't think we should bother with these crimes, Professor," interrupted Victor Reynard, a slight boy with a long, triangular face and rimless glasses. "Crimes of this kind have such esthetic order and purpose that they stand unchallenged as works of art—at least, that's what I think."

Sorites' brows lifted and he hissed impatiently through his nostrils. "To be sure, there is a certain artistic order to so-called 'perfect crimes,' and like most works of art it is the simplicity rather than the complexity which give them quality. But do you not feel a certain outrage that such crimes go unsolved?"

Victor shook his narrow head. "I say, more power to the mind that can get away with it."

The Professor glared, then rose and went to the window, adjusting one suspender as he walked. When he turned back to the group, he spoke patiently.

"Mr. Reynard, I am keenly disappointed in you. In one breath you argue for artistry, in the next, for morality. The outrage of which I spoke is precisely that artistic outrage which comes to an individual when his sensibilities are offended beyond justification, and every particle of his conscience and intellect demands that he step in to reveal a solution so simple, so logically elementary, that perhaps a lesson will be learned by our public servants.

"Such is the outrage I experience when I witness the pathetic motions which the police are going through in the Benevola murder. They have been investigating for nearly six weeks now, and have reached an impasse, as you may know. Therefore, it is my intent to reveal the murderer to the police today—in approximately thirty minutes."

Sorites paused dramatically and shifted his stomach two inches to his left.

"To that end I have invited Detective Lieutenant Barney Dean of the Beverly Hills Police Department to join us today. He is a friend of mine, and though I intend to exercise a friend's prerogative of dealing with him as an incompetent, I must, however, ask your forbearance, and request that you treat him kindly."

The clock on the wall clicked as it jumped forward one minute. Sorites glanced up.

"I have exactly twenty-five minutes to summarize the pertinent facts surrounding the murder before the arrival of our illustrious guest. I will begin immediately.

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"Joseph Benevola was an extremely wealthy man, a dealer in antiques and objects of art. He was an active importer, and maintained offices as well as homes on both coasts. His permanent residence was in Scarsdale, New York, where he and his wife lived alone, but he kept a home open in Beverly Hills, and was there quite often, both alone, and with his wife.

"His house in Beverly Hills is an odd place, an edifice built in the Twenties to resemble, of all things, the Great Wall of China. The only entrance was through a driveway, which led into a central courtyard. Naturally, the house was furnished with Oriental objects acquired through the years by Benevola.

"As I understand from our Los Angeles newspapers, the Scarsdale home was rather different—Tudor, and furnished throughout with Louis XIV.

"Unlike most wealthy individuals, Benevola was reputed to have absolutely no enemies. Indeed, this fact was borne out time and again, and would never have been questioned but for one fact—the fact that he was undoubtedly murdered.

"He was found dead at 6:00 A.M. on the morning of January first. Benevola's houseboy, Lim, found him in his bed where he had been killed at approximately 2:00 A.M., January first, according to the medical report. The frontal plate of his skull had been crushed by a single blow of a heavy, square, prismatic object. The object in question has not yet been located.

"The act of the murder itself was a rather simple matter, since Benevola was under the influence of sleeping pills, which, according to his wife, he had been taking for the last two months. His physician corroborated this, and added that he was being treated for nervous exhaustion, and was under strict orders to retire no later than midnight. But the entire crime puzzled the police.

"The first item which came to their attention was the seeming absence of 'ingress' and 'egress,' as the police are fond of terming it. The gates at the driveway were open, but the house itself, electrically climatized, was closed tight. A thorough check of the windows and doors yieded no evidence whatever of forced entry, and it was learned that Mr. and Mrs. Benevola were the only ones who had keys to the house. Mrs. Benevola was in Scarsdale, and when the houseboy, Lim, began his usual two-day New Year's holiday on December 31st, Mr. Benevola left his key with him. Obviously, this made Lim a suspect, but his alibi proved unassailable. He had been at an all-night New Year's Eve dance given by the Grant Star Benevolent Society, of which he was a member, and was constantly in the company of other members.

"The next step taken by the po-

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lice was a scrupulous search of the premises, which turned up nothing untoward save a carved Ninth Century Tang Dynasty chest, still crated, in the garage. This was not altogether unusual, considering Benevola's occupation, but the fact that it was not in his warehouse aroused the curiosity of the police. Lim explained, however, that the Benevolas were in the habit of exchanging gifts each New Year, and the chest was probably her gift to him, delivered sometime during the two days of Lim's absence.

"Lim also volunteered the information that a week before, Mr. Benevola and a Mr. David Packer, his right business hand, had selected a Louis XIV wardrobe closet for Mrs. Benevola, had had it crated and prepared for shipment in the Beverly Hills garage. A quick check with Phoenix Jet Air Transport, the firm with which Benevola had dealt exclusively for the past six years, confirmed the special delivery of the chest at 1:20 A.M. on January first, and the pickup of the wardrobe at 1:40 A.M. the same night.

"When questioned regarding the proximity of time between the delivery of one gift and the pickup of the other, Phoenix stated that they had had a later pickup scheduled, but a call had been received from Mrs. Benevola at 1:30 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, requesting pickup and flight out immediately because the wardrobe was a New Year's gift. She said she had meant to leave instructions for pickup at the same time her New York package was delivered, but had forgotten until just then, and hoped it was not too late. Examination of previous freight bills confirmed the fact that gifts were exchanged each January first of 1952, 1955, 1957, 1960, 1961, 1962, each one a year when the two had not been together on New Year's Day.

"All attempts by the police to ferret out suspects have failed. The two first suspects were, of course, Mrs. Benevola and David Packer, who had been seen together in New York night clubs and had provoked some chatter among the whisper-and-innuendo columnists. But Mrs. Benevola said that Packer had been her escort with the knowledge and consent of Benevola. Also, each had an alibi—although it was really unnecessary since both were in another state, 3000 miles away.

"Packer had been with Benevola in California until December 28th, when he flew to New York. From the time of his arrival in the east he had been the house guest of Mrs. Benevola. Both were in attendance at a New Year's Eve party given by Mrs. Benevola, and were seen by all the other guests. Packer became ill about 10:00 P.M. and retired to his room, requesting that he be awakened at 10:00 o'clock the next morning. Mrs. Benevola stayed up until 3:00 A.M., then re-

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tired, requesting that she be awakened at the same time as Mr. Packer. The chest for Mr. Benevola was picked up by Phoenix Jet Air Transport at 11:00 P.M. and taken to Idlewild for a Midnight flight.

"Lim was questioned and released. All business associates and acquaintances whom the police tried to link with the crime were able to account for their activities on the night of December 31 and the morning of January 1st."

Sorites paused to glance at the clock.

"I'm precisely on time. Lieutenant Dean should make his entrance at any moment."

Eleven impatient voices burst out in unison, and Reynard's voice rose above the others.

"Go on, Professor, please. Tell us the rest before he gets here, so we'll be able to figure it out for ourselves."

"The rest? But there is no more."

He smiled benignly, pushing his mustache aside with his tongue.

"Of course, Benevola was buried, and his estate went to his wife. Packer is directing the antique business under the probate eye of the court. Lim is to receive $5,000 under the terms of the will—and the police are still looking for new 'facts.' But if you wish to apply logic—*simple* logic—to the facts I have just disclosed, you will have the solution in hand before . . . oh, Lieutenant!"

The door had opened and the detective stood with one hand on the handle and one hand in his pocket, regarding Sorites with suspicion born of experience. Lieutenant Dean had what is called in Hollywood a "character face"—a face with many lines.

"Come in, come in," Sorites urged, "I've been waiting triumphantly."

The Professor took his visitor's arm and led him to the head of the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Detective Lieutenant Dean of the Beverly Hills Police Department. Barney, these eleven youngsters are my students."

Dean nodded his head jerkily.

"We are discussing murder," the Professor went on, "and the application of logic to its solution. As a matter of fact, our attention has been devoted to the Benevola case." The detective shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "Would you mind telling us your latest theories regarding that case?"

Sorites' face was beaming, satanic. The Lieutenant looked at him and suspected a trap, but he was overpowered. His weak voice cracked.

"We have an idea it's the work of a nut. Because we can't find a good suspect. And, anyway, how did the murderer get in and out? And how about the murder weapon?"

He was already on the defensive.

"It has to be some guy with no

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reason, some guy who just came by, got in some way, clobbered Benevola, and left without being seen."

"You would say, then, that your biggest problem was ascertaining the killer's method of ingress and egress?" asked Reynard.

Dean's face brightened. "Yes, and also that every one of our suspects couldn't have possibly been there when Benevola got it. I've never seen a more baffling case."

"Lieutenant," Sorites spoke kindly, "how much money would you estimate the Beverly Hills police force has spent on this case so far?"

"Let's see, now . . . ten detectives for six weeks . . . say, all told, about $15,000.00."

"What would you say if I told you I could solve the case at a cost to you of thirty cents?"

Dean shot a hard-boiled look.

"I'd say you were grandstanding!"

From somewhere in the regions of Themistocles Sorites' abdomen a laugh began to force its way to the surface, and like light from a star it arrived sometime later, rolling out in heroic peals and literally shaking the walls.

"You're right, of course," the Professor said between guffaws. "But merely for purpose of logical demonstration, will you risk thirty cents? You'll be a hero at headquarters."

"Why not? It cost me two dollars last time."

"Money ill spent, Barney. If you had learned that lesson, you wouldn't be here now. Or perhaps I didn't teach you well enough. Well, no matter. We have only five minutes. Let's get to the murder at hand.

"The lesson we all must learn from the Benevola case is where logic begins to have value. I'll illustrate this by showing you the error of your method, Barney—or rather, the inadequacy of your method. Or to be cruel, but truthful, the inadequacy of the minds behind the method. We shall start from the beginning.

"You and your associates were called into the case. As is your custom, you made a list of suspects, numbering them, if I recall your method correctly, one, two, three, and so on, according to the relative strength of motive. I would say that your list had two number ones —Packer and Mrs. Benevola.

"Having duly made these notations, you then prepared, as is also your custom, a second list—of those having opportunity. That is, you wished to do so, but were thwarted in that purpose because of the unusual—indeed, baffling—circumstance that every suspect in the case had an incontrovertible alibi.

"Here I must point out your error of method. Being thus balked, you became frustrated, and, *a priori,* inflexible. Which is not to slight your diligence or effort, for you doubled—indeed, trebled—your efforts. But, alas, you tried to work

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with one system when you needed another.

"Flexibility! Adaptability! These were the qualities called for. The more bizarre the circumstances of a case, the more imaginative the investigators must become. Your two lists were exactly what I began with, but when there was no correlation, I did not question the facts you had uncovered. That would have been a waste of energy and time. Rather I decided that the key to the identity of the criminal lay in facts not yet uncovered! At this point I brought another list into play—strange we should call such serious business play—"

Dean broke in. "Sorites! No dissertations, please!"

"Yes, well, as I was saying. At this point I made another list, divided into two sections. On the left side I placed the names of those who had access to a key to enter the murder house, and on the right side, the names of those who had knowledge of two salient facts—Lim's absence on the nights of December 31st and January 1st, and the fact that Benevola went to sleep before midnight with the help of sleeping pills . . . Do not think it strange that the names of Packer and Mrs. Benevola headed both parts of this list."

"But how about opportunity?" the Lieutenant demanded.

"Hang opportunity—it is immaterial at the moment," snorted the Professor. "To be logical, we must approach the problem step by step.

"Once I had determined that there were only two individuals who had motive, access to a key, and possession of pertinent knowledge, I had to choose which one to pursue. Now, Mrs. Benevola made a call at 1:30 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, to Phoenix Jet Air Transport—a call made from Scarsdale. Obviously, then the subsequent action was clear. My energies could be devoted to the pursuit of one clearly defined object—the proof of Packer's presence at the time of Benevola's death. I knew I was on the right scent, never to be faulted. It was—forgive me—notoriously simple.

"At this point I think I detect some confusion among you. Let me therefore pause to interject some personal theoretical comment which will serve to make my procedure clear.

"The work of a detective is to gather masses of random facts, and then, like a gold miner, sift and pan through the facts till the nuggets are found. Personally I have a repugnance for masses of fact, and fancy myself better than a mere file clerk. So when, some years ago, I began to toy with crime, I affected the title of 'detector'—which suggests imagination and adaptibility.

"Following this course of thought, I long ago found two things to be invaluable to me. One is the knowledge of the person or thing you are investigating, and

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the other is the ability to postulate. The knowledge of the subject in this case was a matter of some consternation—that is, the knowledge of the suspect, Packer. You see, I had an intimate knowledge of Packer, since he was a former student of mine—and a particular favorite, too.

"I knew two things about him—he was an egoist and he had a cunning, perceptive intellect. However, had I not known him, a brief session at the newspaper morgue studying his quick rise in business and social circles would have told me as much.

"The postulate was next—that is, a brief statement, *assumed* to be fact, and used in proof of other assumptions.

"The question for the detector is not 'Is this the way it was done?' or 'Can this be done?' Rather it is this: 'Assuming this *was* done, how?'

"My postulate was that Packer killed Benevola. Assuming this to be true, he must therefore have been at the Beverly Hills house on the night of the murder.

"Now his alibi made it clear that he was seen as late as 10:00 P.M. in Scarsdale, New York, the night of the murder. He was also seen at 10:00 A.M. the following morning. That leaves twelve hours in which Packer could have got to Beverly Hills, murdered Benevola, and returned to Scarsdale. Obviously he had to fly.

"Right now I must summarize what we know or can infer of the crime. It was premeditated and planned. Its precision indicates that Packer got into the house with a key. Packer entered the neighborhood unseen and unrecognized; Packer likewise left the neighborhood unseen and unrecognized. All this, of course, assuming the truism of the postulate.

"Now I bring knowledge of the suspect into play to supplement pure logic. I knew Packer to be acute. He would realize that if he flew as a passenger he would be seen by hundreds of eyes. I also knew Packer to be imaginative—and imagination would dictate a wild simplicity.

"Back to logic. We are now concentrating on two objects in the east—an airport and Benevola's home in Scarsdale. Packer was not seen to go between them. But was *anything?* Yes, indeed—the chest.

"Let us now extend this interesting possibility to Beverly Hills and a Pacific coast airport. Packer was not seen to come to the house from the airport or go back again. But was *anything?* Two things—the chest to the house, and the wardrobe from the house. Surely the conclusion is obvious.

"Give me the privilege of detailing the crime, from its beginning at 10:00 P.M. to its conclusion at 10:00 A.M.

"At 10:00 P.M. in Scarsdale, Packer pleaded sick in the midst of the

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party and retired to his room, leaving specific instructions to be awakened at 10:00 A.M., not before. At about 10:30 P.M., he went to the garage, unseen, and secreted himself in the chest. If you will examine the crate in which you found the chest, Barney, I'm sure you will discover it to be of a special construction which allows it to be secured and released from inside—likewise the crate containing the wardrobe.

"At 11:00 P.M., Phoenix Jet Air picked up the chest in Scarsdale and took it to the New York airport, where it was loaded on a jet transport.

"At midnight, Eastern Standard Time, the jet took off for a four-hour flight, putting it into Los Angeles at 1:00 A. M., Pacific Standard Time, January first. The crate was unloaded and brought by special delivery to the garage of Joseph Benevola in Beverly Hills and left there in accordance with instructions given in advance by Mrs. Benevola.

"At about 1:20 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, Packer climbed out of the chest. The chest was described in the newspapers as a Ninth Century Tang piece. A peculiar characteristic of the chests of this period is that their primary purpose was to receive weighty jewels and heavy metals such as gold, so the artisans of that time cleverly recessed handles of a square prismatic shape into their carved sides. I submit that Packer removed one of these handles, took the key he got from Mrs. Benevola, let himself into the house, and at about 1:25 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, brought the handle down with great force across the head of Mr. Benevola.

"At about 1:27 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, he probably called Mrs. Benevola in Scarsdale, and instructed her to call Phoenix Jet Air Transport to pick up the Louis XIV wardrobe which he had so thoughtfully selected for Benevola the previous week and the crating of which he had undoubtedly supervised.

"At about 1:30 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, Packer replaced the handle in the chest, after having cleaned it, then resealed the crate and climbed into the wardrobe. At about the same time the Phoenix special delivery van received a radio call to pick up the wardrobe and make haste to the airport.

"The wardrobe was picked up at about 1:40 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, and by 2:00 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, Packer was on his way back to Scarsdale.

"The four-hour flight put the wardrobe in New York at 9:00 A.M., Eastern Standard Time. By 9:40 A.M. the wardrobe was delivered to the Scarsdale garage of Mrs. Benevola. By 9:50 A.M. Packer was back in bed, pajamas on, waiting for the maid to call.

In actuality, the whole crime

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had been committed between the hours of twelve midnight and 9:00 A.M.—what is picturesquely known as the graveyard shift."

"That sounds great!" Dean was enthusiastic and the class buzzed. "But how do I prove it?"

"That is where the thirty cents come in, Barney. Go to a pay telephone and make three calls. First call—to headquarters; have headquarters establish the actual weight of the chest in its crate and the actual weight of the wardrobe in its crate.

"Second call—to Phoenix Jet Air Transport; learn from their freight bills the shipping weight of the chest-and-crate from Scarsdale to Beverly Hills, and the shipping weight of the wardrobe-in-crate from Beverly Hills to Scarsdale.

"In each instance you will find a discrepancy between the actual weights and the shipping weights. So, with the third dime, my friend, buy a pencil and pad, which you will use to subtract the actual weights of the chest and wardrobe in their crates from the shipping weights of same.

"In each instance the difference will be the exact weight of Mr. David Packer—that is, if there is any logic in logic."

Professor Themistocles Sorites beamed as he patted the front bulge of his 412 pounds.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE PAPERBACKS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Aarons, Edward S.	ASSIGNMENT KARACHI	Gold Medal	35¢	9/27/62
Armstrong, Charlotte	CATCH-AS-CATCH-CAN	Ace Books, Inc.	50¢ (doub.)	10/10/62
Armstrong, Charlotte	THEN CAME TWO WOMEN	Ace Books, Inc.	50¢	10/10/62
Bloch, Robert	BLOOD RUNS COLD	Popular Library	40¢	10/18/62
Lynch, Dan	THE FOUR TIME LOSER	Gold Medal	35¢	9/27/62
Prather, Richard S.	BODIES IN BEDLAM	Gold Medal	35¢	9/27/62
Prather, Richard S.	TAKE A MURDER, DARLING	Gold Medal	35¢	9/27/62
Stout, Rex	THE NINE WRONG ANSWERS	Bantam Books	40¢	10/1/62

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 241st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a Halloween story that has a haunting quality—indeed, a remarkable "first story" in delicacy of touch, emotional content, and sharpness of characterization. We expect a great deal in the future from this new writer.

Mrs. Pat Wallace Latner is "primarily a poet" and has had "a few poems published, one in 'Mademoiselle'." She is in her early thirties, married, and works as an executive secretary for a labor union. She does her writing at night ("soundlessly on the kitchen table") and on week-ends. She comes from Alabama (with a banjo of words on her knee), attended college in Tennessee, and has been a disc jockey and a semi-pro (!) actress.

We sincerely hope to see more—much more—of Mrs. Latner's prose.

TROUBLE HOUSE

by PAT WALLACE LATNER

IT WAS MORE THAN A YEAR SINCE the funeral, but all the neighbors were still talking about it, as if it happened yesterday: And still the big white house next door was empty—so empty-looking that it gave Liddy the creeps. She buried her face in Barney's fur.

They were sitting on the high front porch the way they always did on summer nights, listening to the Lux Radio Theatre—Liddy's mother, and Liddy's grandmother, Nanny, in the stiff porch chairs, the child on the steps caressing the dog.

Daddy was in the sun parlor with his *Post*, looking very solemn as he read. The play was "Wuthering Heights," so he had his deaf ear turned to the radio. His lamp made a golden path through the screen, bringing something of autumn to the russet tiles and to the child's auburn head against the sage-brown coat of the animal. Barney started licking her face.

"Heathcliff," wailed Merle Oberon, and tears gathered in Liddy's eyes.

"Child! I've told you time and again not to let that dog lick you. He's just full of germs."

"Oh, mother," she sighed and let him go. Then Cathy was dead, the music swelled, and the soap commercial came on.

Liddy's father called, "You gals through with this foolishness?"

"Yes, honey."

The radio clicked off. It was hot

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under the milky moon and motionless, when all of a sudden a wind moved in the giant sycamores next door, causing a spatter of prickly balls. A dog howled dismally from somewhere on the hill.

"Whooo-ooh," hooted Nanny, "some poor soul is dyin'."

"Shoot, that's just superstition and you know it," said Liddy's mother. "You talk just like the nigras."

Superstition my foot, thought Liddy. A dog had howled every single solitary time—when Mr. Henry who kept the monkey lost his mind, when Gertrude's mamma died, and then Sarah Florence. The Vaughn house sure looked haunted. After all those things happened, the Negroes began to call it Trouble House.

"Looks like it's gonter rain," commented Nanny, peering in the dimness. The silence whirred with nightthings; she added, "The poor child. *Sixteen* years old and laid out in the grave."

The wind in the sycamores reminded Liddy of how Gertrude's mother breathed before she passed away.

"A ravin' beauty," Nanny vowed, "just like me when I was young. A belle, I do declare. Liddy, did I ever tell you how I used t' ride?"

"Oh, mamma, please don't tell it again."

"Pooh, I never told her," Nanny said indignantly. Liddy had heard the story 97 times, she figured. "I used to ride the wildest horses that there was," began the old lady. "I was a stepper, yessiree bob, just like that poor dead child."

Liddy's mother made a martyred sound and put a piece of Bugler paper in her mouth. She said it kept her from getting cancer of the tongue from smoking.

"Whooee," shrieked Nanny suddenly, letting her teeth out to rest the gums. Then she cackled through her dentures like those old Sir Harry Lauder records, faraway and hollow. She popped her tongue out and drew the yellowed bridges in.

"I still don't understand how they could bury that girl in such an outlandish dress. Just like a sportin' woman."

"Please don't say those things in front of Liddy."

"I still think," Nanny pursued, "it was mighty crazy."

"Horrible," her daughter said. "Red and black, mercy."

Liddy remembered Sarah Florence in the coffin, wearing her black evening gown, over it her red bolero, and gardenias in her hair. When they filed by and no one was looking, Liddy felt her face, cold and skinnish as a rubber doll's.

The funeral had been just like a play, with the Vaughns sitting half behind a steel-gray curtain, Miz Vaughn red-eyed, and Margaret Ann just staring through her big blue-marble eyes.

What happened afterward was thrilling—when Sally Sue Henderson, Sarah Florence's best friend,

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had gone to Florida with the Vaughns after the funeral, and run right into the ocean in water up to her neck, crying, "Flossie, Flossie, I'm coming to you," and they had saved Sally Sue; the summer after she married an atheist and had a baby without any eyes—just skin where they ought to be—which Nanny called God's punishment.

"I want to be buried like that," said Liddy softly. "It was so pretty."

"Well, Merciful God," exploded Nanny, "it's a wonder you don't get struck by lightnin'. I never heard of such a thing."

The child jumped up and ran into the house, banging the screen behind her. In her room she knelt down by the window and looked across the driveway at Trouble House. *I know*, she sang to herself; *only Margaret Ann and I are the ones that know. And I will never tell a living soul.*

Liddy crept to the highboy and silently slid open the bottom drawer. There underneath her socks and panties was a black, furry thing. Liddy took it out and rubbed it tenderly against her cheek; then with it to her breast, she threw herself on the bed.

The Vaughns and Sarah Florence had come up from Montgomery to live—it seemed so long ago—and moved into the house next door. There was Margaret Ann, in Liddy's grade at school; a mean white Spitz named Snow; Mr. and Miz Vaughn; and Sarah Florence.

Liddy's mother said she was so glad there was a nice little girl to play with and no little hellion of a boy to shoot the birds, and then she wanted a neighbor so much. But the Vaughns were different from other people. Mr. Vaughn, a daddy-looking man who smoked cigars, would come home late and drive them out to supper at the Pandora Restaurant, where Liddy's mother found a roach in a cornstick once and nearly died.

Margaret Ann's mother was the hugest woman anyone had ever seen. She didn't cook or sew or anything like other mothers; all she did was lie on her *chaise longue* and drink Coke—she drank a carton every day—and think up things to buy for Sarah Florence. Miz Vaughn would walk around in her bedroom shoes and a wrapper, moving like a boat around the yard, her long hair gathered in a sloppy knot.

Margaret Ann, the younger one, was ugly as a mud fence, skinny with large legs and a pear-shaped face; around it her tan-colored hair hung limp, work as she would with the curling iron. She stared balefully at the world from great blue-marble eyes.

Her sister, Sarah Florence, was the beauty; she had long black glossy hair that curled just so. Miz Vaughn would say to Liddy's mother, through the hedge, "I swear Flossie's complexion is like a flower petal. I always order special powder for her face." Or, "I declare that

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child wears out more stockin's. She's proud as a peacock of those little feet. She will take off her shoes at dances, but I can't do a thing with her. I wish the child would take care of herself. She's got—" she paused obscenely—"diabetes."

Margaret Ann and Liddy got to be best friends. They hated Flossie, as Sarah Florence called herself, because she went out on dates in the smallest possible shoes, elegant in gray squirrel coat over a pale angora sweater. Both of them wore size-seven oxfords; Liddy had braces in her mouth, but Flossie's teeth looked like a toothpaste ad. Flossie's eyes were large, dreamy, and gray. And she never ate candy.

Whenever the two played paper dolls, one doll was Flossie and got into horrible accidents.

The first Halloween the Vaughns lived next door came clear and frosty. Liddy was in her witch costume, her black eyes gleaming bright. She and Margaret Ann were going to go out and do some awful things; she straightened her pointed hat and sang as she ran across the driveway through the privet hedge.

The Vaughn house looked deserted. Then Liddy saw a pallid light upstairs. She padded to the second floor, dragging her broom behind, crying, "Margaret Ann."

Then Liddy remembered that the Vaughns were not at home, and that Flossie had gone to a ball. The only sound was a gnat-like wailing of a paper horn outdoors.

"Margaret Ann," she called again, and heard a tiny rustle come from Flossie's room. She skipped to the doorway and stood quite still.

A skeleton in black sateen with painted bones was going through the highboy, removing fairylike things, furry masses in shades of daffodils and roses, hyacinths and midnight, winter mornings, spring and autumn leaves. Hearing the scrape of the witch's broom on the varnished floor, the specter wheeled around. Margaret Ann was smiling through the cut-out mouth of the mask, showing her ugly canine teeth. Her big blue-marble eyes looked wild in the skull. "Liddy," she whispered, relieved, squeezing the coral angora sweater she was holding in her hands.

"Flossie was beautiful tonight," said Margaret Ann. "She had on a pumpkin-colored dress, and her shoes went with it. But she's not going to any more dances." She grinned.

"What do you mean?" breathed Liddy.

"She's been wanting candy lately, awful bad. She walked around all afternoon wanting something sweet. When we get our candy tonight I'm gonna leave it in here."

"But what if your mamma should find out?"

"Mamma," said Margaret Ann contemptuously. "Mamma'll be asleep. She always is. Will you give me your candy?"

Liddy hesitated. "I don't know."

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"Pretty please, Liddy," begged Margaret Ann. "I'll give you any sweater you want, almost any."

Liddy flopped down on Flossie's pale-blue satin bed and rubbed the coverlet with her hands; they were beginning to sweat.

"When she dies," Margaret Ann said, "I'll get all this"—they stared at the soft angora sweaters—"and the squirrel coat, too. Look."

She took from the highboy an ice-blue angora that matched one of Flossie's evening gowns. It was frosted with crystals and seed pearls. "I'll get this one, too. Which one do you want, when she dies?"

Liddy just stared. She felt warm all over and wonderfully bad—like the time she'd peeped at the little boy wee-weeing.

"Can I really?"

"Sure."

"The black one! The black one," Liddy squealed. "It looks like night."

Then she grabbed the skeleton's arm. "But won't they give her some medicine?"

"Don't be stupid," Margaret Ann spit out. "It's insulin. They can't. I hid it."

They heard the Vaughns' car drive up beneath the porte cochère; the specter stuffed the furry sweaters back into the drawers. "Come on!" whispered Margaret Ann. "Mamma doesn't want me in here." And they scurried down into the dark.

Next morning the Vaughns went to church without Sarah Florence. "Let the child sleep," Miz Vaughn ordered. "She needs her rest."

It happened during Sunday dinner. They were sitting in the dining room when they heard the shriek, clear and unearthly on the sunny air. It came from Trouble House. Barney, in the basement, moaned three times and then began to howl. Liddy's mother went across the driveway.

That night the child tiptoed down the stairs from bed to listen.

"It was horrible, just horrible," her mother was saying. "They came home and the child was in a coma. It was just too late. Miz Vaughn was just beside herself. She said an awful thing. 'Why did God have to take the *beautiful* one?' I think Margaret Ann *heard* her."

"Peter Dodd!" expostulated Nanny. "It's a punishment from God, that's what it is. She just idolized that child."

Liddy stole back upstairs and looked down from her window at the Vaughn house. Everything was dark, until an orange brightness formed around the outdoor barbecue. Someone was in the back.

The child went barefoot down the long back stairs, across the driveway through the harsh green hedge.

Liddy saw Margaret Ann in her long flannel gown, crouching over the barbecue pit, poking at a fire. When the other child heard Liddy, she jerked upright in terror, clutching an ice-blue furry thing against her chest.

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"Oh, it's *you*."

"What are you doing?"

Margaret Ann's eyes were glassy in the firelight and very cold; she grinned, exposing her canine teeth. They were covered with tartar. Liddy realized, feeling giggly, that Miz Vaughn probably hadn't thought to fuss at Margaret Ann about her teeth ever since Flossie died.

"They want to bury her in this!" Margaret Ann was livid. "She can't have it, she can't have it. It's *mine*. Why should I give it to the worms?"

She was holding the ice-blue angora, its crystals and pearls gleaming like the Snow Queen's clothes. She rolled it up into a ball and threw it in the fire. The pearls spit off their shells; the soft, furry thing smelled like a burning animal.

"Mother promised her to bury her in evening clothes." Suddenly Margaret Ann's teeth began to chatter. "You won't tell! You won't tell what I told you on Halloween!"

She ran wild-eyed to Liddy and grabbed her arms. She squeezed them cruelly.

"That hurts!" sobbed Liddy.

"Promise you won't tell," cried Margaret Ann.

Liddy looked up at her mother's drafty window; the pongee curtain stirring back and forth reproved like a grown-up finger. She hesitated. "No," she said then. "I won't tell. If I can have the black one."

"I told you so."

"All right then."

Moving as one, they took the ashes of the soft pale thing out of the pit and sowed them on the grass, grinding them to powder beneath their thin bare feet. And stiff with cold, the children ran away into their lightless house.

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A simply "gorjus" tale of The Great Plane Robbery which will make your eyes water for chuckling and your mouth water for—well, for more stories about Raymond Hopping Turtle (the "military Raffles").

Welcome to a new American humorist—of a type that seemed to have become The Vanishing American, but which we sorely need these laughless days . . .

THE PEGASUS PILFER

by H. C. NEAL

A TALENT FOR HORSE THIEVERY was anything but a character fault to the Comanche Indians who roamed the windswept plains of Oklahoma at the turn of the century. To the contrary, skilled thievery was an inborn trait to be developed into an honored profession by every brave of the tribe.

Possibly the greatest professor of all was Chitty Yellow Eagle, chief of the Comanche, scourge of the prairies, and particular burr under the saddle of the U.S. Cavalry. It is a matter of record that in 1895, Yellow Eagle was cited as the sole single cause of complete nervous breakdown by four consecutive supply officers at Fort Sill. All four of the poor chaps, it seems, suffered from the same piteous ailment—repetitious losses of hosses.

And, inescapable to even the most casual observer of human nature, is the fact that history—just like an Indian war chant—has a delightful way of repeating itself.

Case in point . . .

Some fifty years after Yellow Eagle had riddled the dignity of the U.S. Cavalry, his grandson, Sergeant Raymond Hopping Turtle, walked into the supply room of a small army paratroop outpost in Japan during the occupation following World War II. His friend, Supply Sergeant Hal Nickerson, had summoned him.

"Greetings, O Noble Red Brother," Nickerson intoned solemnly. "How are you today and how is your pointed little head with its valued talent for finding things even before people bother to lose them?"

"May peace abide in your tepee, O Noble Paleface sutler," the Comanche replied ceremoniously. "As to the second part of your question, that is none of your cotton-picking business."

"Oh, but it is," Nickerson rejoined, "because I—your bosom friend, your staunch comrade, your constant protector from the evil machinations of the white man's army—I have a problem."

"Did you ever not have a prob-

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lem, Sergeant Nickerson?" muttered Hopping Turtle, easing his lanky frame into the battered rocking chair they had liberated from some nameless Officers Club. "What is it this time?"

"A mere trifle," the stocky Nickerson replied casually, "a bagatelle. This morning, the small white father, Captain Hicks, informs me that I am suddenly lacking one minor item of our equipment—one of the small winged steeds that bears our lean-jawed comrades so gracefully through the sky."

"A plane?" Hopping Turtle exclaimed. "You mean you've lost an airplane?"

"You speak with a straight tongue, my friend," Nickerson replied, with fake humility.

"Great leaping antelope!" the Indian declared. "You have pulled some lulus in the short time you've been in charge of this trading post. But how in the name of a three-legged dog did you manage to lose a *whole* airplane?"

"It was easy," his friend replied. "When I hit the sack last night, I had two airplanes on hand or accounted for in my records, just as every good supply sergeant should have. When I got to work this morning, I had only one."

"It is written on the wind," said Hopping Turtle resignedly, "that I am a fool for asking. But what happened to the other one?"

"That is where the plot thickens, my conniving redskin." Nickerson helped himself to one of his friend's cigarettes, lit up, and leaned back in his non-issue antiquated rocker.

"Let me lay it out for you in some semblance of order. This outfit has two airplanes on the property book just like every Headquarters battery in Division Artillery, right? Right—two liaison planes—Cubs. Okay. For the past several months, the great white division commander, General Joe, has been using one of my planes for his personal gadding about. He can do this because he has signed a memorandum receipt for said aircraft. Also because he is a general with the pretties on his shoulder."

The Indian grunted impassively.

"Now," his friend continued, "do you remember where General Joe moved his tent to last week?"

"Indeed I do," replied Hopping Turtle. "Like all good warriors, he departed this accursed slant-eyed land of the honeybucket for the happy hunting ground across the mighty blue waters—the U.S., *and* A."

The supply sergeant nodded solemnly.

"Don't tell me—" said his friend, the light beginning to dawn, "don't tell me he took your airplane with him?"

"And the pilot," Nickerson replied, "and the all-important memorandum receipt which he neglected to return to me after he signed it while checking out the plane."

The Indian studied his friend's

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face for a long moment, then sighed. "The good general giveth, and the good general taketh away."

"Quite so," Nickerson replied, "but that won't slice any ice with the Inspector General when he invades our little bailiwick this Friday to sniff around like a blind dog in a butcher shop. He will not only scrutinize my property book with the all-seeing eye of a hungry hawk, he will also want to look at the two airplanes. Both of them. And when he notes that half of them are missing—*mayday!* Heads may roll like tumbleweeds and stripes will shower down as thick as the driven snow."

"The IG is coming? The man with the fuzzy ears?"

"That is he."

"This Friday?"

"Precisely."

"Well, my friend," the Indian pronounced, "you do have a problem. Since the book says two airplanes, I would advise you to get yourself another airplane."

"I marvel at your ability to see straight to the heart of the matter," Nickerson scoffed. "A report of survey is out of the question—much too late."

"And you damn sure can't buy one, even though you are outrageously overpaid," Hopping Turtle mused. "Sergeant," he continued, "you do indeed have a problem. However, I am confident that a man of your capabilities will come up with a ready and painless solution. Why don't you try shooting yourself?" he added, heading for the door.

"Hold it, young warrior," said Nickerson evenly. "Contain your haste. I already have the answer."

Hopping Turtle halted in his tracks, his face clouding with instant suspicion. Turning slowly, he whispered. "Congratulations?"

"You are going to get me another airplane," said Nickerson, with assured finality.

"Uh-uh!" the Indian protested. "The whole thing sounds like something of which I want no part of. Deal me out."

"Oh, but I will deal you in, my noble thieving redskin Indian pal," Nickerson replied with gentle assurance, "because if you don't, then a whole slew of unpleasant things might occur."

"Like what?" his companion asked, instantly alert to the slightest hint of double-cross, as any man must be at times, especially with his closest friends.

"Like I will lose these miserable stripes I wear so proudly and deservedly," Nickerson replied, "and the loss may unhinge my tongue, and like I might tell all sorts of interesting tales to our mystified superior officers. Like what happened to the Captain's jeep you stole last month and sold to the Japanese black-market man and then ducked into the alley and put on your fake MP armband and came back and confiscated the jeep away from him. Like what happened to

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the parachute you buried under the mulberry tree after the last practice jump, and then went back and dug it up later and shipped it home to grace your wigwam. Like the black-market pearls you mailed home to your sister in a cartridge marked 'Exposed Film—Do Not X-Ray.' Like—"

"Enough!" Hopping Turtle exclaimed. "You need a liaison plane. Any suggestions?"

Sergeant Nickerson grinned with Machiavellian satisfaction. Then, as though nothing had been said before, "Did you ever notice how many airplanes the Ninth Corps has at the airstrip we sharecrop with them down at Sendai? I bet they wouldn't even miss one if it got stolen, say, while they were all out to lunch or something."

"You prattle in an unknown tongue, White-Man," his friend retorted in mock anger. "Nothing is ever stolen in the army. Some people borrow, but no one ever steals."

"An interesting distinction," Nickerson observed, "I wonder that I never thought of it myself, being in supply work and all . . ."

Hopping Turtle dropped his cigarette to the floor, ground it out slowly with the toe of his jump boot while Nickerson watched in outraged neatness, and said, "I'll think around it and let you know tonight what I'm going to need."

"Sure, pal."

Nickerson and the Indian had been friends for a long time and Hopping Turtle had been a military Raffles even longer. A thoughtful, introspective man, he was a fine combat soldier and a dependable no-mistakes parachutist. He had learned long ago that if you must be a soldier it is less harassing to be a good one.

Nickerson, like his friend, was also a good soldier instinctively, but rather inclined to worry about details. In view of this trait, his apparent confidence in his buddy's ability to cope with the problem at hand—replace a missing aircraft—might have struck a stranger as passing strange—a stranger, that is, who didn't know the capacity for foresight and attention to detail possessed by the Indian.

The Ninth Corps' main airstrip, which was shared jointly with our friends' division, the Eleventh Airborne, was located at Sendai, some 32 air miles from their artillery base in the mountains. Although Corps used one side of the airstrip and the airborne unit used the other, each group had its own hangars. Under normal flying conditions they didn't even share the same runways.

Sometimes, one or two of the six liaison planes belonging to the paratroops were kept temporarily at a small cow-pasture airstrip adjacent to the mountain base. Of these six planes, two were Nickerson's—or, more correctly, they were items of equipment in his battery, and listed in his property book by serial number and engine number.

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Nickerson was lying on his bunk after chow that evening when in walked his talented comrade.

"White man, I got a plan," Hopping Turtle announced.

"Please don't tell me about it," said Nickerson defensively, swinging up to a sitting position. "I'd rather not know, the situation being what it is."

"Oh, very well," replied the Indian petulantly. Then, after a pause, "Here's what I'll need—one jeep, one three-day pass, one jug of happy juice, one carton of cigarettes, some paint and brushes, and one interpreter. Murt would do nicely."

"Now just a cotton-picking minute," Nickerson objected. "You can have everything but Murt. He's my boy. He sweeps out my supply room. He mops the floor. I'm getting ready for an IG inspection and I can't do without him. Get yourself another interpreter."

"Things are tough all over," Hopping Turtle replied brusquely. "Do you want an airplane or not?"

"All right, all right, so take him. When are you leaving?"

"Soonest."

A word from Nickerson to Captain Hicks assured the three-day pass for the Indian sergeant, and the use of a jeep. Nickerson furnished the cigarettes and liquor. He wondered briefly what his friend's plan might be, but wisely refrained from pressing him. Smart stockholders don't question the business procedures of U.S. Steel.

The Indian sergeant and the Japanese boy left early next morning, Tuesday. The Inspector General was due Friday morning. Nickerson, supremely confident, turned his attention to other matters and that day passed tranquilly enough. And the next.

Thursday morning, when he had begun to sweat a trifle, Nickerson got a telephone call. It was Hopping Turtle, from the Sendai airstrip.

"Listen, Old Cock, can you shoot me a flyboy down here to drive this thing?"

"You got it!" Nickerson exulted. "What took you so long? Where did you—?"

"Knock it off," the Indian cut in. "There's going to be some stink stirred up around here when certain people get around to counting certain things. I want out before they get curious. Now, round us up a pilot and zip him down here. Murt can bring the jeep and I'll come back in the plane. Get cracking!"

The elated supply sergeant mentally ran his finger down the officers roster. Lieutenant Hill. Sure. He was around somewhere, and besides, he owed Nickerson a favor.

"Your boy is practically on his way," he informed his friend. "Where will he find you?"

"In the air section mess hall," replied the Indian, and hung up.

Nickerson found Lieutenant Hill in the motor pool with a couple of enlisted men, engaged in a serious discussion of female plumbing.

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"How'd you like to take a little ride?" he asked, taking the officer aside and clueing him in on enough of the action to get his point across. "Apparently he's got us a plane and it's urgent that he get the hell away from there with it."

"Deal me in, Sarge," grinned Hill, who thrived on intrigue. He remembered that the unit's second airplane was due for a 500-hours engine overhaul and reported this to Captain Hicks. Within 15 minutes he took off from the mountain airstrip in the ailing craft and pointed her nose toward Sendai.

Less than three hours later, Hopping Turtle ambled into Nickerson's supply room, grinning like a bigmouth bass that's been invited by mistake to a bullfrog convention.

"Get out your book, boy, and your handy bottle of ink eradicator," he chortled. "You've just got yourself another airplane."

Nickerson gleefully adjusted the records to remove any trace of the craft previously borrowed by General Joe. He then posted the engine and vehicle serial numbers of the new plane, copying from a scrap of paper on which the Indian had carefully noted them down.

"The paint ain't dry yet," Hopping Turtle commented, "but the lientenant says it's a good plane and the engine's in good shape. We named her Pegasus."

"How did you do it?" Nickerson asked, closing the book and leaning back in his chair expectantly.

"Question not the methods of your noble Red Brother," his friend replied haughtily, "and don't pester Murt when he comes in. I've sworn him to secrecy."

Nickerson delighted Captain Hicks with his report that all major property items were now on the record and safely accounted for—including airplanes—and that officer's obvious relief betrayed the pressure he'd been under. The sergeant seized the opportunity to mention that his Indian friend had figured rather prominently in their present state of well-being.

The Inspector General could find very little wrong with Nickerson's supply operations next day, passing him on the inspection with a resounding rating of Excellent.

Captain Hicks immediately shed one of his ulcers; Sergeant Nickerson got his coveted staff-sergeant rocker; and Sergeant Hopping Turtle got a seven-day leave to Kyoto, an army resort fairly seething with rest and calm contemplation. To these conditions the Turtle was much addicted.

It wasn't until eight months later, when the lanky redskin's tour of duty was ended and he was being rotated back to the States, that Nickerson learned the details of the peerless Pegasus pilfer.

On the morning of his departure, Hopping Turtle was ready for his train two hours before it was scheduled to pull out. It was mid-morning on a Sunday and the barracks were

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quiet. He ambled down to Nickerson's room at the far end of the building.

"Turtle," said his friend, as the Comanche ensconced himself in a beat-up rocking chair, "the next time we see each other you'll be the wise old chief back there in Okemah with your squad of squaws dogging your footsteps in mute adoration. I will be the visiting con man swinging through town in pursuit of a few fast greenbacks. None of this we've gone through over here will be important any longer. So tell me how you did it."

The Indian regarded him gravely for a moment, then asked, "Did what?"

"You know what, pal. Fill me in. How in the sacred name of my grandfather's retirement pension did you get me that airplane?"

"Well, it wasn't easy," Hopping Turtle replied. "As you may remember, Murt and I left here on a Tuesday morning—" He paused, stroking his throat suggestively. "O Noble White Brother, would you by any chance have any firewater in that trick drawer at the bottom of your desk?"

"Indeed I might," Nickerson affirmed briskly, reaching into the drawer and coming up with a fifth of the treasured 86 proof. "Be my guest," he added, pouring expertly into canteen cups.

"Well," said the Indian, after his first appreciative sip, "we got down to Sendai before noon and at that time of day, of course, there wasn't much I could do about the mission, it being daylight and all."

"That do hamper a man," Nickerson remarked.

"So I turned Murt loose to go visit a friend of his who dabbles in tailoring and mimeographing," Hopping Turtle went on. "Then I passed the rest of the day playing poker and hoisting the suds with some of the clowns at the air section."

"You drank beer?" Nickerson queried in disbelief, "when it is a foregone conclusion that you had a bottle of Old Tennishue tucked away in your tucker bag?"

"But of course, Incredulous One. I was saving the high-octane stuff in case I would somehow need it to execute the mission and rescue your worthless hide."

"Such friendship," Nickerson marveled. "I shall certainly recommend you for the Purple Shaft with the Oatmeal Cluster."

"You are too kind," the Comanche retorted drily, then, as if reminded, he took another sip. "That night I snuck across the landing field and scouted their set-up. They'd put every one of their horses in the stables, which pretty well snookered me for the time being. I then proceeded to pass the day in the same manner as the previous one—at the gaming tables."

Hopping Turtle had his own pet theory about the idiotic tendency of some poker players to draw to an inside straight, and stood ready to

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sacrifice his mother's oil wells to prove it.

"I hit paydirt that night," the Indian continued. "It was a nice flying day and the Corps had put all their birds in the air. They flew far and wide and late. Some of them didn't get in until dusk. Consequently, I noticed that when the protective gods of darkness had spread their friendly mantle over all us earthly creatures, the flying fellows had left some of their mules outside the stable."

"Don't be so damned picturesque," Nickerson complained. "You mean they left some planes out? Untended?"

"Steeds, my friend. Great winged steeds. Just the species I wanted to capture. And all on a picket line."

"Aha!"

"Aha, indeed. This was more like it. Murt and I jumped into the jeep and cruised over to take a closer look at the situation. But as we drew near the planes, we were rudely challenged by an armed American male . . ."

At this point, Dear Reader, let us terminate our eavesdropping on this remarkable conversation and backtrack in time to that encounter on the airstrip to see for ourselves exactly what did happen there on the night of The Great Plane Robbery . . .

The Ninth Corps sentry, his rifle at port arms, has just halted a jeep driven up to his post near the line of aircraft. Murt, the Japanese boy, was behind the wheel, and his passenger was Sergeant Raymond Hopping Turtle.

But, lo, the Turtle was no longer identifiable as a member of the Eleventh U.S. Airborne Division. Instead, he now wore the shoulder patch of the Ninth Corps above his stripes. His shiny jump boots were nowhere in evidence. In their place he sported low-cut slippers, like those affected by company clerks and other office-type personnel.

Dismounting, he carried a clipboard with some official-looking papers on it to the front of the vehicle and glanced at them briefly in the headlights.

"What's your name, soldier?" he asked brusquely.

"Private James Pettingill," was the reply.

"Serial number?"

"A.U.S. 8 792 631. What's this all about, Sergeant?"

"Just wanted to make sure you are who you are supposed to be," Hopping Turtle replied, rather pompously.

"And who am I supposed to be, and why?"

"At this moment," replied the Indian off-handedly, "I'd say just about the luckiest damn GI in all Jaypan. You're being sent back to the States on a plane that leaves tomorrow morning."

"Back home? Tomorrow? Man, you don't mean it! How come?" The sentry was puzzled, not quite

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able to believe his ears, but already almost hysterically happy—rather like a tomcat who has just blundered into a mouse convention.

"Where's your home, boy?" asked Hopping Turtle boredly, in the manner of a data-surfeited personnel clerk who already knows the answers to any question he could possibly have reason to ask.

"Sioux Falls."

"That's your answer."

"But I don't get it, Sarge. One minute I'm walking guard and the next minute you tell me I'm going home tomorrow. How come?" he repeated.

"It's simple," retorted Hopping Turtle, "Eighth Army has just discovered that you are the five thousandth man to be sent over here from Sioux Falls. Apparently that makes it a big deal. Anyhow, they are sending you back to sell war bonds or head a recruiting drive or some damn thing. All I know is I've got to walk your guard until the OD digs up a replacement to finish out the night. Imagine," he added disgustedly, "a buck sergeant—walking guard for a private so he can go back to the States."

"Gee, Sarge, that's wonderful!"

"Yeah, ain't it," said Hopping Turtle morosely. "Here, give me that damned rifle. You hop in the jeep and the boy will drive you back to your barracks so you can get packed. Your orders are being cut now and another jeep will pick you up at—" he glanced at his watch—"1:30 to take you to Tokyo. Your plane takes off from there tomorrow morning."

The elated young soldier thrust his rifle at the Indian, unclasped his ammo belt and handed it over, and jumped into the jeep.

"Hold it," said Hopping Turtle, "there's one more thing. I've got some money here for you, a partial payment in advance. The army don't want you to go home broke. It will help square any trouble you might run into," he added thoughtfully.

He handed the young soldier $250 which he had won in the poker game earlier that day. "Sign here," said the Indian, thrusting his clipboard at the boy.

Pettingill scribbled his payroll signature, clutched the money, and grabbed Hopping Turtle's hand for a hasty shake. "Thanks a million, Sarge," he enthused, "and best of luck."

"The pleasure is all mine," replied the Indian.

Hopping Turtle listened keenly for a minute or two after the jeep had disappeared. He then stood the rifle against the wall of the nearest hangar and draped the ammo belt over the barrel opening so that no moisture could get in and foul the bore. Despite the need for haste now, Hopping Turtle could not bear the thought of a weapon being neglected.

After a last look around the field, he quickly jerked the chocks from

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the wheels of the end aircraft on line, pitched them into the seat, grabbed up the tail, and pushed the plane across the strip toward the Eleventh Airborne hangars on the far side.

By the time Murt returned a half hour later, Hopping Turtle had the plane safely stowed in a locked hangar and was already repainting the entire craft . .

"So after she dried a little, we covered her in our division colors, insignia and all. Took damn near all night. Then, while Murt went single-footing after some coffee, I added the name on her nose and gave you a call."

"Hopping Turtle," remarked Nickerson earnestly, "I would pronounce your execution of that mission a resounding success, except I can't help wondering about that kid, the sentry. No doubt he ran into trouble by the gross."

"Not likely," replied the Indian suavely. "Murt has a friend who has a mimeograph machine. We really did cut some orders for the boy—they looked even more official than the real thing. As far as we know, he might have made it clear back to Sioux Falls before those people down at Corps knew what happened. You know how confused it can be at times, what with people coming and going, planes coming up missing . . ."

"And even if he didn't make it home," said Nickerson thoughtfully, "they couldn't get too hairy with him anywhere along the line. After all, he was just following orders."

"Precisely," commented Hopping Turtle, sipping appreciatively from his canteen cup.

"And of course it would be some officer who would ultimately get the blame for the whole thing," Nickerson pursued his train of thought. "Probably wind up in—"

"What's that you said?" interjected Hopping Turtle with renewed interest.

"I was going to say it will probably wind up in the lap of the Corps commander." Nickerson answered. "Why the sudden concern over who pays for that misbegotten airplane as long as it isn't us?"

"You said the Corps commander?" repeated the Indian.

"Sure " said Nickerson, wise in the channels of supply accountability. "It would take a while to determine final responsibility. Everyone up the line would buck it up a notch higher. And that's the way the army likes it, you know. They don't want Captains or Majors, who can't really afford it, to have to pay for an airplane. But a General—now that might be different. It would depend on how much weight he swings in Washington."

"Would you say it is likely that the case isn't settled yet?" asked Hopping Turtle, his eyes sparkling. "It's been eight months, you know."

"Well, the way these things work out," replied his friend, "I'd guess it

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might be another month or two before the thing comes to a head. It would be my guess that whoever is commanding Ninth Corps about three months from now stands a good chance of paying for that airplane."

Hopping Turtle suddenly threw his head back and burst into laughter —a rare thing for him to do.

"That's rich," he chuckled, "Boy, that's heap rich."

"What gives?" asked Nickerson. "You act like you knew it was going to be your mother-in-law who gets stuck for the price of that airplane."

The Indian slapped his thigh until he trickled off into a running series of half-suppressed giggles. "Better than that," he sputtered. "I just heard this morning—Watts told me over at the mess hall—Ninth Corps has got a new commander—"

"Well, who is it, for Pete's sake?"

"It's our great white father, General Joe," the Indian sputtered between renewed gales of laughter. "He did such a good job at commanding our division that Washington promoted him and sent him back over here as commander of the whole damn Ninth Corps."

Some moments later, when their laughter had subsided so that Nickerson could refill the canteen cups without spilling any, he wiped his eyes and mustered up a more sober countenance.

"Turtle," he commented, "that's working out awful nice, but it don't take away from the fact that you did a pretty good job yourself before you knew how things would turn out. There must be a moral in there somewhere."

"Indeed there is," the Comanche responded. "It is expressed in a timeless message written years ago by the elders of my tribe. They carved it in the enduring sandstone of the prairie, no doubt with the knowledge that some day you and I would soldier in Japan."

"And what is this eternal verity conceived and handed down by the tribal sages?"

"If I remember correctly," mused Hopping Turtle, "it goes something like this: *It is better that the left General knoweth not what the right Indian doeth.*"

"Has a right nice ring to it," Nickerson opined.

"It is a thing my grandfather taught me when I was but a young buck," replied the Indian modestly. "I think he learned it at Fort Sill or some place."

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A fascinating story with an irresistible theme . . . about the biggest manhunt in the history of England, and of a danger so dreadful that an entire nation could be blackmailed, and of

THE MOST WANTED MAN IN THE WORLD

by YOUNGMAN CARTER

DR. FORSDYKE, SENIOR RESEARCH Assistant at the Evans and Layton Laboratories, flicked the tiny glass capsule with his cuff and it rolled along the bench for a full yard. It was pure chance, the lightest touch, for he was not a clumsy man; but it was the beginning of a considerable journey.

One of the dozen juniors in the laboratory, who happened to be standing next to Dr. Forsdyke, was also taking material from the safe. The junior did not notice the incident, but ten minutes later he swept the capsule into a batch of his own, almost identical in appearance, parceled them carefully, and then handed them to the boy from the dispatch office.

This was at half-past twelve on the morning of the 15th of April, a Friday. The capsule was not missed until six o'clock that evening, the wrong hour at which to start a hue and cry. Dr. Forsdyke knew precisely how important the loss might be, but he was in an impossible and frustrating position. It was after nine that night before he deduced, accurately, what had happened to the capsule and nearly midnight before its sixty possible destinations had been unearthed.

By then Dr. Forsdyke was gray with terror.

In the small hours he explained the situation at Scotland Yard to a weary official who had been dragged from his bed to deal with the problem, for this was a matter for experts.

"Now this drug . . ." said the official.

"It is not a drug at all." Forsdyke was explaining his troubles for perhaps the twentieth time. "It is a virus culture—the disease in person —don't you understand? It is part of a collection sent from Hong Kong —the isolated brute itself, sealed in a glass tube about four centimeters long. You break the top to get at the contents. We at Evans and Layton are trying to discover the antitoxin—so far without success. This germ has come down from God knows where in China or Mongolia where it has been killing thousands, possibly millions. It's a very hardy specimen, bred out of a lot of half-witted experiments behind the Iron Curtain where they've been playing around with cholera antibiotics for

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years. The only result we know of is this entirely new virus which nature has developed for herself to beat us all. It is as infectious and as contagious as 'flu, it kills within a few hours, and at the moment there's nothing we can do to stop it."

"I see," said the official. "Then if someone takes it by mistake for something else, he's a dead man."

Forsdyke sighed. "If anyone injects himself with that quantity he will be dead within minutes. But that isn't the gravest danger. The victim will be found dead. Someone will touch him, fumble with his clothes, probably two or three people. Then a doctor, ambulance men, mortuary-assistants—say a couple of dozen people. Within twenty-four hours, even if they're still alive, they'll all be carriers. Now do you see what I'm driving at?"

At the Home Office the Assistant Commissioner explained his problems on Monday morning to a white-faced group. "As far as we can tell," he said slowly, "this damned virus was confused, God knows how, with a perfectly normal drug sent out to dispensing chemists, hospitals, and so on, in the usual way of business. They're all recorded, of course, very strictly. It isn't a very usual drug, thank God. Out of the sixty batches sent out we've recovered fifty-three intact, which narrows the field to seven lots. Only these seven have reached the public.

"Six of these seven have been traced and the poor wretches are now under observation. There have been no results so far, which is a very good sign, because this thing works like the wind. Practically speaking, we can be sure it's not one of them. Number Seven is our headache."

The group looked at him silently and he plodded on as if reading a prepared statement.

"This drug is used as an injection—the chap can do it for himself—to alleviate pain of a particular kind. It is given to victims of one of the off-shoots of polio. It gets them in the legs generally and hurts, I'm told, like the very devil. A shot of this cools it off and may keep them quiet for days.

"It needs a doctor's prescription, which helps us quite a bit.

"You see, Number Seven, whoever he is, is carrying six—probably five now—capsules round with him and he may not use the vital one for a long time. We can't count on that, of course—he may have done it already."

"I thought," suggested a Home Office man, "that you said there was a record of these things. If the search is so narrow now, why can't your last man—your Number Seven—be traced?"

The Commissioner referred again to his mental notes.

"The vital capsule," he said, "was almost certainly given out yesterday at an all-night chemist's in Baker

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Street. That is to say, it is one of the six little tubes—six separate injections—which are issued on a single prescription. Unfortunately, the prescription was forged and whoever obtained it gave a false address and almost certainly a false name."

There was a general murmur of concern.

"Then we're back where we started? . . . The B.B.C. must send out a message—the press—"

"That is not quite the end of our inquiries," said the Commissioner. "We have a fairly shrewd idea who the man is—or, at least, a reasonable supposition. Last week—on Sunday night to be precise—a man escaped from Wakefield Prison. Henry Musgrave Saunders, 43, doing time for mail van robbery. He's thought to be in London and he's been having treatment for this particular trouble. There's more than a chance that he's the chap—our Number Seven. A very intelligent criminal, and dangerous. He's been a free man for a week, so he must have money or friends. The chances are that he's reached the Smoke by now—he's a Londoner—and he fits the chemist's description to a T."

He looked up from his invisible notes and surveyed his audience individually.

"Now we have several choices before us. We can broadcast a detailed description and explain both to him and the public why he is wanted. That sounds very fine and practical—but it has objections. The first is that this man is the type who might prefer suicide to arrest. If he does, the epidemic will start from there. The second is that if anything is explained to the public about this danger it may cause considerable alarm, to put it mildly. The third is that if we merely say he has a dangerous and lethal drug in his possession he may very well decide to use it as a weapon without realizing just how powerful that weapon is.

"If he knew precisely what he was carrying about with him he might even decide to blackmail the entire nation—and he'd possibly get away with it. And, of course, there is another important factor. Evans and Layton, as you probably know, is part of W.C.C.—World Chemical Combine—and very strong pressure is being put on us to settle this without public knowledge. Bad for—uh—prestige. They're powerfully—I use the word advisedly—against any injury to their reputation at this particular moment.

"As we see it at the Yard, there is only one possible course. That is, we must set off the biggest undercover manhunt in history. And the facts don't give us much time."

It was five hours before Henry Musgrave Saunders, late of Wakefield Prison, received some of the impact of that morning's decisions; but even before that the day had not been easy. He was carrying too much money for health in his circle of acquaintance, despite the fact

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that his escape had been costly and nearly half his share of loot had gone to procure it. There remained, however, just over £1000 in beautiful, dirty assorted notes—a very dangerous cargo for a man in his social position. He was not only at the mercy of every informer or blackmailer who could recognize him but he was also utterly unprotected.

Then there was the added problem of pain.

And finally, the question of the girl: everyone in the business would be watching her. Phones would be tapped, letters scrutinized, and she was bound to be shadowed night and day.

Better than most, he could spot a plainclothesman at a reasonable distance. This afternoon he was a little late because his leg was blunting his reflexes.

The officer facing him was middle-aged but mercifully slow: his reactions were those of a bad actor doing an underlined double-take.

This was on the corner of Piccadilly Circus, jut outside Swan & Edgars. It was five o'clock and the afternoon was sunless and chilly.

The older man had seen him first, by a few seconds. By the time Saunders realized what had happened, the watcher had taken a paper from his pocket, checked it, and started to move.

Saunders reacted automatically, shifting behind a group of walkers so that he was temporarily out of sight, and then turning to the first shop window which reflected the enemy. He saw the man hesitate and then turn to the police call-box.

This meant that he was registered as being in the area and that danger was imminent. He turned into Aire Street and paused for a moment in the shadow of the Regent Street arch. A uniformed policeman, standing magnificently back toward him, made it necessary to hesitate.

Saunders thought almost with detachment about the men who would soon be searching the neighbourhood for him. How much had they memorized about him? How much did they know? Six foot two, sallow complexion, dark hair, and of course a heavy limp.

This last was the crucial item.

It was a difficult and intensely painful business, smothering that limp, an acrobatic feat accompanied by torture; but if he took it slowly it could be done.

Under the arch he took off his trench coat, in case it had now been added to his identification, folded it over to show the tartan lining, and flung it carelessly over his shoulder. He ruffled his hair, put on his glasses, and doubled agonizingly back into Piccadilly.

Almost opposite was a man's outfitters, a palatial establishment of several floors, comfortably full of late shoppers. Once inside, he felt it safe to straighten up, limp freely, and gain a few minutes before any plain-clothesman got on to him.

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He made a couple of purchases from a bored and busy young man: two caps which could be folded into a pocket, a sporting check and an inconspicuous green.

To these he added a muffler, reversible in a different color, and a pair of sunglasses. The tobacco kiosk also provided inspiration in the form of a large cherrywood pipe, happily out of his normal character.

In green cap and yellow muffler, and puffing jauntily on the pipe, he made for the Jermyn Street exit. No one had noticed him, he decided. In the unruffled calm of an artists' supply store he bought a large indiarubber, some sable brushes. and a tube of gum.

By now a drink was essential to dull the pain in his leg and provide a pause to consider strategy. He settled for a small expensive hostelry toward St. James—an establishment with several advantages, including a respectable washroom and exits on two streets. He was, he decided over his first gin, to be a sporting type, probably ex-R.A.F., and he began to think himself into the role as an actor might.

He had a second gin, but the pain was not alleviated.

The real problem was to reach the girl and to get some money to her—somehow to pierce the cordon. Once it was in her hands she could time her own getaway and he could lie low until the worst of the hue and cry was past.

In the washroom he filled out his cheeks with the indiarubber, which gave a satisfactorily pouchy look, though it was hardly comfortable. A shot of the drug—only four now remained—restored his balance.

In his absence a man, obviously a plainclothes policeman, had come into the bar and was looking around. Freedom from pain gave Saunders the courage to eye danger casually and to order another drink. Then it was time to move.

The suburbs, he had decided, were the safest hideout for the night. A taxi immediately outside the bar took him to Edgeware Road where he collected a bag from the tube luggage office. Watford seemed the farthest point.

It was going as well as could be expected.

At half-past six the Assistant Commissioner held a conference. The day's reports were before him. Saunders had been seen in Beaconsfield, Truro, Goole, Bradford, Lowestoft, Newhaven, and in Central London.

"The Piccadilly report seems the most likely," said his aide. "He was noticed by a reliable man there, who's used to this sort of thing. This chap says he's pretty sure their eyes met and that Saunders, if it was he, disappeared into thin air. Wearing a trench coat, he says. Otherwise he can't add much.

"But there's some confirmation for the story. Our chaps went round all the pubs in the area within the

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hour. At the Craven, in Jermyn Street, a barman says a man came in limping heavily and went off after a couple of drinks as fit as a flea. He thought it odd."

"Well, assuming this is the chap, where do we go from here? If he was limping, maybe he was in pain and gave himself a shot. It can't have been the right one or we'd know by now. How are you following up?"

"Every possible way, sir. If he was spotted in London and knows it, he may go to earth if he's got friends. This we doubt, because they may be as keen to meet him as we are, for different reasons. No, he'll not go far—because of his girl, we think. He might step out to the suburbs—Hendon or Kingston or Colindale, somewhere like that—anywhere on a tube line where he could nip off smartish. They're all alerted, of course."

"I see. Now about the girl?"

"She works at a hairdresser's in Pimlico. A quiet little kid, by all accounts. We've got men on her twenty-four hours a day."

The next day's conference was a meeting of angry men. They were rattled and unhappy, for at that level there was no buck-passing to be hoped for.

Commander Rayne of the C.I.D. made his report in person to the Assistant Commissioner.

"He's slipped us," he admitted. "We can disregard all the out-of-town stories—there's no doubt now that he was the man in the West End yesterday.

"This morning there was information from Watford—just the sort of place we expected. A man booked in at a commercial hotel just by the station, last night. The local police had made their checkup just before he arrived, and he didn't altogether fit the bill. He does seem to have had a bit of a limp however when he left this morning. What put them on to it was the fact that he had a fight in his room sometime during the night. A man was picked up by the landlord this morning trying to sneak out of the pub and he'd clearly been badly beaten up in the suspect's bedroom. The room was a wreck.

"This chap's name is Hicks, Charles Arthur, a small-time con-man with a long record—he's even been an informer in his day. Pretty clear what happened. He must have spotted Saunders somewhere along the line and gone into his bedroom to put the black on him.

"Hicks hasn't sung to us yet but he evidently got the worst of it and spent part of the night either knocked out cold or tied up with a gag in his mouth, probably both. The sheets were in ribbons and our bird had flown.

"We've got a bit more description. He is now a sporting type—big pipe, yellow muffler, green cap. He's discarded the trench coat—left it in the tube. If he's got money he may switch his outfit again.

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"But that's not all, unfortunately. It looks as if he'd reached the girl right under our noses. Very neatly done, really—you have to take your hat off to him."

"I'm not in the mood," said the A.C. gloomily. "What happened?"

"At half-past twelve this morning," recited the Commander, "a man arrived in Ember Street, Pimlico, which contains the back door of the Maison Henriette where the girl works. He was on a Gambetta, one of those little scooter jobs. Stolen in Watford. Completely typical, our man says. Bowler hat, duffle coat, and R.A.F. mustache—hundreds of 'em about. Our chaps didn't give him a second thought. He was carrying a box of chocolates and some flowers wrapped in cellophane. A couple of the lady assistants came out of the shop on their way to lunch—not his girl, Jessie Dale, but two friends.

"Saunders, if it was he, went up to them, gave them the stuff, and they took it back inside, evidently at his request. Our chap says he thought nothing of it until little Jessie took her lunch, or rather should have done. Actually, she nipped out earlier than usual, caught a taxi, and vanished. There was a squad car up the street but she managed to get lost all the same. The other two girls say a nice gentleman asked them to take the flowers and chocs in to Jessie because it was her birthday. She read the card on the bunch, took the lot into their washroom, and when she came out, shared the chocs with the girls, left the flowers in a vase, and set off for outer space without saying goodbye.

"Our guess is that Saunders sent her the best part of a thousand quid in that box of chocolates and told her just where to go. She knew perfectly well we were tailing her—in fact, she was cooperating very nicely until just that moment."

A telephone bell had begun to murmur discreetly in the room and from habit, the A.C. waited for Rayne to finish before answering. Then he listened in silence for a full minute, said, "Yes, well, keep at it," and hung up. "Your man Hicks," he explained. "He's sung, as you envisaged. Admits everything. One new detail. After the fight in the bedroom Saunders tied him up and gagged him. But he could still see. Saunders gave himself another shot just before he left. That leaves, according to our reckoning, just two capsules to go.

At that precise moment the man called Henry Musgrave Saunders was speeding along a line somewhere between Much Hadham and Bishop's Stortford. His little machine was running easily and his plan was clear. He would leave it at a garage on a pretext of repairs and take a Cambridge train. He had discarded his duffle coat and returned to his sporting check cap and muffler.

Then a sudden flash of pain, as violent as a rapier stab in a nerve,

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threw him and the Gambetta completely off balance.

They swerved together, struck the side of the ditch, and the man was flung forward, like a sack of turnips, into the knotty bank of the hedge.

He lay there for an hour and a half.

Toward midnight Commander Rayne and the A.C. spoke again.

"This beats everything," Rayne was shouting with fury. "We had him—had him stone-cold, right in our hands—and he walks out into thin air."

"What happened this time?"

"Found lying by his motorcycle in a ditch in Hertfordshire. Both of them smashed up. Good Samaritan took him into Bishop's Stortford Hospital." He sighed heavily. "He was there for an hour—a full hour—eight stitches in his forehead. Then they let him go—just ten minutes before the local people identified the bike as the one he'd lifted in Watford. I ask you! Ten minutes, and he's vanished."

The A.C. stood up.

"Well, it's something," he said. "Now listen. I want action. Cordon off the area, get every available man in Herts and Essex on the job. Vans—loudspeakers—dogs—the full treatment. We're looking for a limping man with a heavily bandaged head. Even you ought to be able to spot him from a hole in the ground."

"Precisely so," said Rayne, adding heavily, "Sir." He paused for a moment and continued. "Those orders were issued an hour ago. So far we've pulled in twenty outpatients with bandaged heads—none of them the right one. I came to ask you for any extra ideas you might have."

By Thursday afternoon nearly four hundred bandaged persons had been questioned, searched, and reduced to varying stages of fury. Saunders had been reported, bandaged and unbandaged, in Newmarket, Colchester, Northampton, and King's Lynn.

Yet the net did not produce the right fish.

At six in the evening every senior policeman in East Anglia was exhausted and all over five counties grim men were tramping fields, combing woods, and waiting wearily at four hundred roadblocks. Traffic over a quarter of England came virtually to a standstill.

On Saturday evening, at precisely 7:15, a turbaned Indian wearing a dirty white robe which might well have been a sheet and carrying two cheap rugs over his shoulder arrived on a lady's bicycle at the police station at Gurney St. Mary in Suffolk. After some delay he was admitted to the distinguished presence of Inspector Duncannon, who was in no mood to discuss the problems of itinerant rug sellers.

"Well?" he inquired, cocking a ferocious eyebrow at the placid figure now seated before him.

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"My name is Saunders," said the stranger. "Get a doctor."

Then he collapsed.

Inspector Duncannon was a prudent man. He had been fully warned about the dangers of the infection or of touching any corpse that might appear suddenly in his vicinity.

He rang for the Police Doctor, a courageous soul named Bartlett, who had sufficient forethought to call at the hospital on the way and provide himself with the vital drug.

Saunders, relieved of the torment which had driven him senseless, was trying to pull himself together. He sat before them, his turban making an untidy heap on the floor.

His bandaged head gave him the air of a tired hero of a melodrama.

"Well," he said. "Here I am. I had a run for my money, but you beat me. Had to give up, you know. Too many of your chaps looking for me. I shouldn't have thought I was worth all that trouble."

The doctor and the Inspector exchanged glances. Then it dawned on them that Saunders was completely ignorant of his own importance. Duncannon, as was his habit, approached the subject like the elderly crab he largely resembled.

"You've caused a deal of bother," he began severely. "You and your girl friend. A verra considerable dance as you probably know full well. And what precisely did you do with the wee Jessie Dale?"

Saunders rubbed his wounded forehead. He made quite a romantic figure with his stained-brown face, the trace of blood on his brow, and fatigue in every line of his body.

"My girl friend Jessie, as you call her? By now I hope she's in Switzerland. Incidentally, your police work isn't always so good. If you haven't laid your hands on her already you never will, so there's no harm in my telling you. She's my daughter—got a touch on one lung. A year or so out there is just what she needs. Anything else you want to know? Oh, yes, I beat a man up—half killed him, I'm afraid—but he was a small-time crook, so you won't be too worried about him. I pinched a motor scooter and wrecked it—you know that, no doubt. I've broken and entered one or two houses for food, sheets, rugs, and oddments, including a bicycle. I've lived pretty rough, mostly in ditches. Damned uncomfortable. I'll make a full statement when I've slept a bit."

"Now, not so fast, my friend," said the Inspector. "We ken a thing or two about you that maybe you don't know yourself."

Saunders eyed the two men quizzically. Even in his weariness the reception was puzzling him.

"The doctor will tell you. You see, for the best part of a week you've been the most wanted man in the world. You didna ken that?"

Dr. Bartlett held out his hand and it was shaking.

"I want your injection syringe,

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the one you carry with you, and any capsules you may have left. It's very important."

Their prisoner fumbled with agonizing slowness in the recesses of his sheeted robes. Finally he laid the syringe and one glass capsule on the table.

For a time nobody spoke. The Inspector mopped his brow and the doctor rubbed his spectacles and then his hands with a handkerchief. He examined the little glass object minutely without touching it. Then he sighed heavily.

"That's it all right." To the bandaged man he said, "It's a miracle you're alive."

By gritting his teeth Saunders managed a smile.

"Nice of you to care about me," he said. "Not that it's important now. I've shot my bolt, I've done what I set out to do and I'm dead beat. Nothing in the world matters a damn to me any longer. You'll have to tell me something interesting if you want to keep me awake."

The Inspector stood up, towering above the drooping figure.

"Maybe I will," he said. "You're a remarkable man, perhaps the most remarkable man on earth. It's a miracle you're alive, as the doctor says. What may interest you is this, if you can spare us the time. An order came through from the Home Office ten minutes before you had the good sense to walk in here. 'If Henry Musgrave Saunders will surrender to the police, together with a medical supply which he is believed to be carrying, no further charges will be made against him and his present conviction will be quashed.' You're a free man, ye ken, or will be by the morning. What do you say to that?"

"Wake me late, Inspector," said Saunders, and he bowed his head in his arms over the table. Then with a supreme effort he raised himself again. "By the way, Doctor, that last capsule—I'd never have used it. The color was wrong—too dark an amber altogether. Mine are as yellow as cheap lemonade. People sometimes make damn silly mistakes and I don't believe in luck. Good night."

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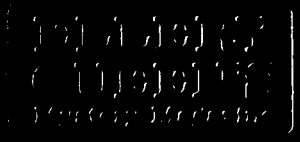

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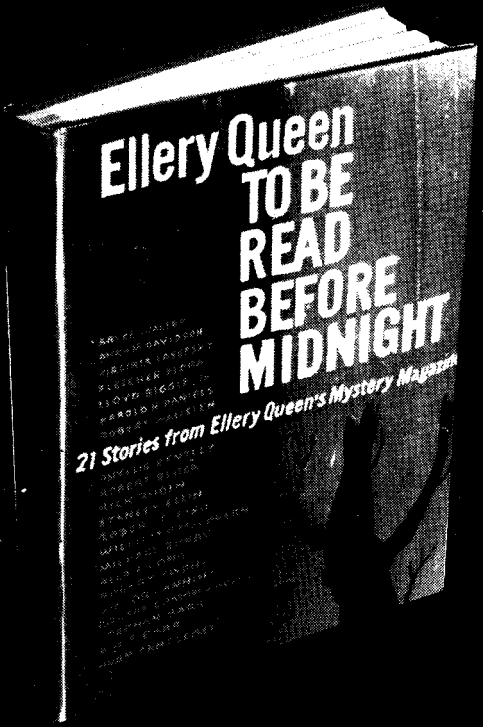

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